FILE NUMBER 2009

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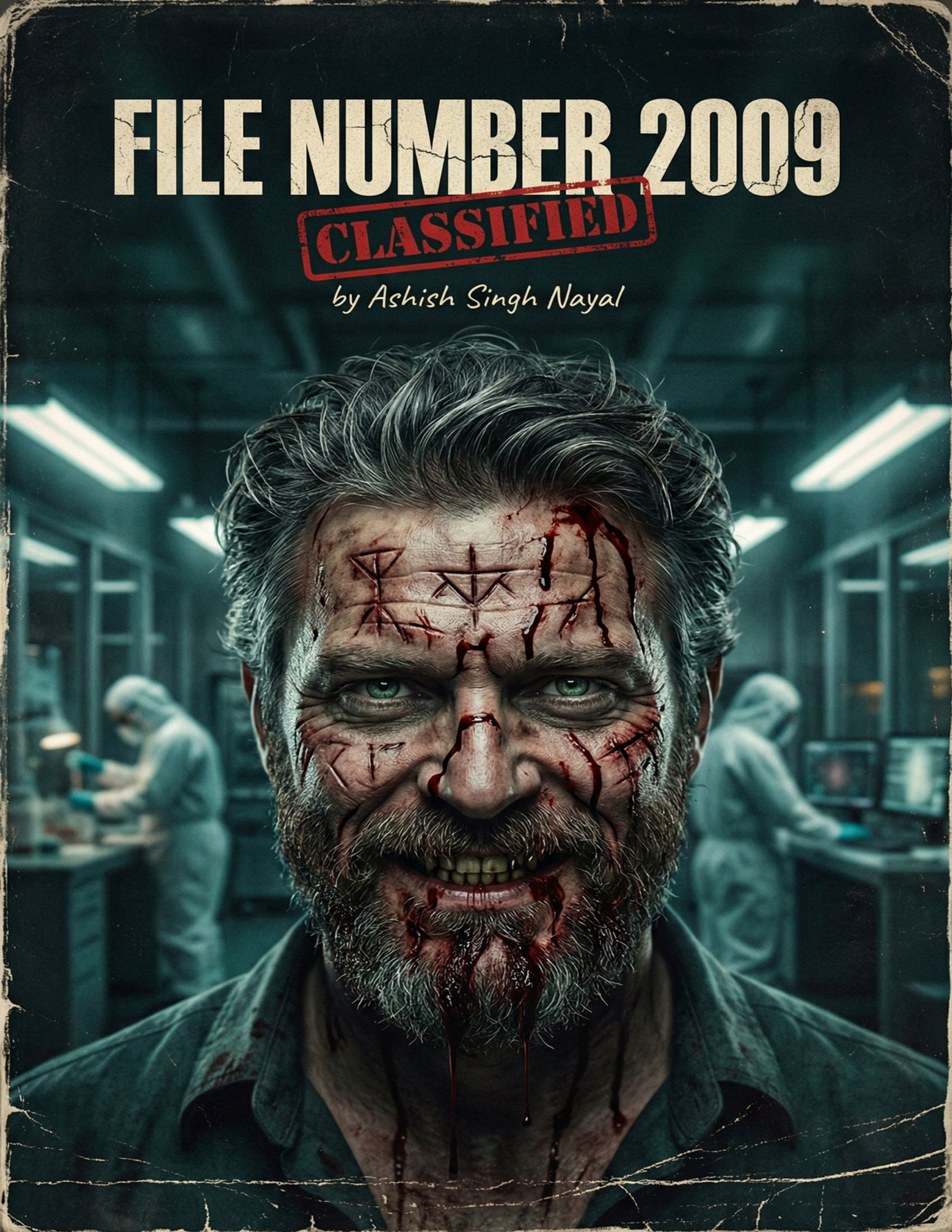
by Ashish Singh Nayal



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A Novel

Ashish Singh Nayal

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First Edition

Dedicated to those who believe that ordinary days can hide extraordinary truths.

“The scariest things are not hidden in darkness.

They are hidden in normalcy.”

Chapter 1 – The Morning That Felt A Little Too Ordinary

Mornings in Gangtok never arrive with a shout. They unfold softly. Over the hills floated a thin sheet of mist, as if someone had forgotten to remove the white curtain from the mountains. The air held the quiet chill of the Himalayas—not biting, just enough to make you pull your sleeves down to your palms.

At Sikkim University, the day began slowly. Students were coming up the sloping footpaths, walking lazily with bags slung over one shoulder. Some had steel cups of tea from the small canteen near the gate. Some were already laughing loudly, as if the day had given them permission to waste time. This campus didn't feel like a place of strict studies. It felt like a place where stories are born quietly.

On one side stood the library building—silent and solemn, like an old professor watching over everyone. On the other were long corridors, connected to the classrooms where the real drama of college life played out—friendships, rivalries, crushes, gossip, and those unspoken competitions that no one admitted to. The notice boards were filled with half-torn posters: Coding Club Recruitments, Basketball Trials, Lost Calculator, Freshers' Party Photos.

Here, life moved in small, ordinary moments. A group of boys near the stairs was arguing about cricket. Two girls were walking slowly, sharing a single earphone, pretending to ignore the world. Someone was running, late for attendance. Someone else was walking slowly because they simply didn't care.

And inside one of those classrooms, located on the third floor of the Engineering block… three lives were about to collide in a way they themselves could never have imagined.

The large windows of that classroom opened towards the hills. Sunlight fell in slanting lines onto the wooden desks, scarred with the names of former students.

“Rahul ❤ Divya”
“CS 2025 Legends”
“I was here”

The ceiling fans rotated at a lazy pace, making more noise than air. The chairs were never in a straight line. Bags were thrown here and there. On the whiteboard, half-erased formulas from yesterday’s class were still visible.

This was not a disciplined classroom. This was a living classroom.

Some students had come early and were chatting. Some were on their phones. Some were pretending to read, just in case a professor walked in.

And near the last bench, sitting unusually quiet… was Alok.

Alok always chose the same seat. Not because he liked being a backbencher, but because it was the one place where he could exist without attracting much attention. He was lean. Slightly stooped. His shoulders were naturally hunched inward, as if he had spent years trying to make himself smaller in a crowd. His shirt was always clean, but never properly ironed; the collar edges stayed slightly curled. His shoes were clean, but so old that faint cracks showed at the seams.

His hair was combed very carefully, slicked with a bit too much oil—as if external discipline could protect him from the chaos around him. The small, worn bag beside him was always completely zipped shut. As if he feared his own belongings might draw attention if they escaped.

When nervous, he would rub his palms together. Sometimes his fingers pressed so tightly that his knuckles turned white. His eyes hardly ever met anyone’s. They were either fixed on the desk… or lifted towards the door at the slightest sound.

He spoke very softly. So softly that people would ask him to repeat himself—and after saying it a second time, he often chose to simply stay quiet.

What hurt him the most wasn't bullying. It was the laughter that echoed afterwards. He had learned to distinguish between different types of laughter—the friendly laugh, the careless laugh, and the laugh that was directed straight at him. And he had learned to tune out that last kind.

Despite all this, Alok was filled with a strange kind of honesty that felt old-fashioned now. His notebooks were always complete. Assignments were always submitted on time. He never cheated on exams. He didn’t lie to avoid trouble. He felt that if he stayed honest, harmless, and invisible… maybe life would leave him alone.

But life had never made him that promise.

A few benches ahead, near the window where the sunlight fell in golden stripes, usually sat Rudra. He wasn't there yet—but even in his absence, his presence was clearly felt. His bag lay carelessly on the desk, as if someone had planted a flag to claim the seat. A steel water bottle stood nearby. A rough notebook lay open, filled not just with notes, but also with odd doodles, half-written ideas, gym timings, and funny remarks about professors.

Rudra was one of those students who didn't enter a room quietly. He arrived with noise, laughter, and energy that spread faster than gossip. Tall, broad-shouldered, naturally athletic—he walked as if he had never been afraid of

the world. His hair was always a little messy, as if he never had the time to fix it. Sleeves rolled up. A black thread around his wrist. A confident smile that came easily and left only when things got truly serious.

He talked to everyone—seniors, juniors, teachers, lab assistants, canteen staff. Not to seek attention, but because silence bored him.

But Rudra's real identity wasn't his strength or his humor. It was his habit—of jumping into matters that had nothing to do with him… simply because he couldn't stand to see something wrong. Because of this, he had gotten into trouble before.

And he had never learned a thing from it.

Right behind his seat, leaning a little towards the wall, usually sat Mayank. In contrast to Rudra's desk, Mayank's space was always orderly. The bag placed properly. The notebook aligned perfectly with the edge of the desk. The pen kept perfectly straight, parallel to the notebook—as if measured.

Mayank didn't speak unless necessary. And when he did, people listened—not because he spoke loudly, but because he didn't waste words. He observed more than he participated. His eyes were calm, thoughtful, always quietly scanning the room. When seated, he would clasp his hands together, his thumbs moving slightly when he was deep in thought.

He wasn't as physically imposing as Rudra, but his posture held a quiet firmness. A sense that he had certain boundaries no one should casually cross. He didn't like unnecessary drama. He didn't like unnecessary people either. But he valued honesty deeply.

If Rudra was fire, then Mayank was still water. And somehow, the two balanced each other perfectly. Most people in class saw them simply as good friends. But those who paid attention knew—if Rudra ever walked into a confrontation, Mayank was never far away.

Three students. Three personalities. One room. One routine. One ordinary college life.

In this moment, nothing about them seemed special. They were just part of

the same cycle of lectures, attendance sheets, assignments, lab records, and everyday chatter that flowed through these corridors daily.

Outside the windows, beneath the clouds, the mountains stood silently. Inside, the ceiling fans made their lazy sound over scratched desks and half-erased formulas.

This was an ordinary classroom. An ordinary morning. An ordinary day.

So ordinary… that no one present in that room could sense how close they stood to a chain of events that would shatter this entire routine. Events that would pull them out of this classroom and far beyond books and semesters.

Something connected to a past buried years ago. Something recorded in old, dust-covered files.

They had no idea that in the coming days, their lives would change in a way that would shock not just Sikkim… but the entire world.

One morning, Alok reached the classroom much earlier than usual. The corridor outside was still quiet. The slight chill from the hills was coming in through the windows. Empty classrooms always felt larger to him. He placed his bag on the last bench and sat down. His fingers tapped lightly on the desk, restless. His gaze kept lifting towards the door again and again.

He wasn't waiting for the lecture.
He was waiting for fear.

Chapter 2 – The Dance, The Girl, and The Don

A few minutes later, Ronny entered the classroom with the door creaking. His steps carried their usual carelessness. He was chewing gum, his cheeks moving slightly with each chew. His eyes swept the room as if scanning everyone out of daily habit.

But his gaze immediately stopped and fixed on Alok.

Alok was hunched on the last bench as usual. Rubbing his fingers together. Eyes fixed on the door. As if he wasn't waiting for someone, but for fear itself.

Ronny came over. Leaned in and whispered, close to his ear—
“Relax… Papa isn’t coming to college today.”

The words were spoken very softly. But to Alok, they rang out like a loud bell.

Ronny was the Chemistry professor’s son. For the other students, this was just a normal piece of information. But for Alok… that sentence was like a sentence being lifted. Like someone had suddenly removed the sword hanging over his head.

For a few moments, Alok just stared at Ronny.

His eyes were still. Lips slightly parted. As if his mind was still trying to understand the meaning of those words.

Then, slowly, his shoulders began to relax.

A long, heavy breath escaped his chest — as if he had been holding it for minutes.

All the tension in his face began to melt. A strange shine came into his eyes. That kind of shine that only appears when fear suddenly, without warning, vanishes.

Suddenly, he stood up.
So quickly that even Ronny was startled.

And then… he started to dance.

No rhythm. No steps. Just small, awkward, clumsy movements. His hands gently swirling in the air. His face lit up. He was smiling — openly, unselfconsciously, without thought.

It was the kind of joy from childhood, when a school holiday is suddenly announced.

Ronny watched him and smiled faintly. His smile wasn't mocking, just understanding.

At that same moment, the light, precise sound of heels echoed from the corridor.
Tap… tap… tap…

A shadow paused at the door.

Riya walked in.

Her entrance was, as always, quiet but impactful. She didn't try to look at anyone, yet the atmosphere of the room changed.

Her hair fell neatly over her shoulders, swaying slightly. A very faint fragrance came with her, not strong, but noticeable in the air. Her uniform was perfectly arranged. Sleeves evenly folded. A watch gleaming on her wrist. Earphones in her ears.

She walked as if she knew people were watching her… and was used to it.

Nearly every boy in the class glanced at her for a moment.
And then immediately looked away.

Riya had a strange distance about her. She wasn't rude. But she also didn't give a chance to get too close. She spoke politely, but very little. A smile rarely touched her face. And she had mastered the art of making someone feel invisible without saying a word.

As she neared the door, her gaze fell on Alok.

She stopped right there.

Alok was still in the middle of the classroom, dancing with those small steps, lost in his strange joy.

For a moment, clear surprise washed over Riya's face.

She slightly shifted one earphone, as if wanting to make sure she was seeing correctly.

Then, a very faint, very small smile touched her lips.
It was a smile of the kind she would never admit to showing anyone.

She said nothing.
Walked quietly towards her seat.
Sat down.

But her eyes weren't on her phone anymore.
She was quietly watching Alok.

Just then, the classroom door opened again.

The sound of the door opening wasn't particularly loud… but its effect was as if someone had changed the direction of the air in the room.

Kabir walked in.

Tall frame. Heavy steps. Broad shoulders that almost filled the doorframe. His very way of walking made people unconsciously clear a path. Behind him, as usual, were Brijesh and Saaho — like his shadows, who understood his signals without a word.

Usually, Kabir's walk had a different kind of dominance. A slow, deliberate swagger. As if he knew his mere presence in this room was enough.

But today was different.

His jaw was clenched. The veins in his neck were slightly visible. Irritation was clear in his eyes. Annoyance was spread across his face as if someone had already ruined his day before he even came to class.

Brijesh leaned in close and asked quietly,
“What happened, bro? Why do you look so upset today?”

Kabir was just about to answer when his gaze suddenly fell forward.

Alok.

He was still standing in the middle of the class. Still dancing with those clumsy, innocent, joy-filled little steps. A smile on his face. A lightness in his eyes.

The expression on Kabir’s face changed that instant.
As if all his annoyance had suddenly found a target.

Without a word, he strode towards Alok with heavy steps. The sound of his shoes echoed on the floor.

And without uttering a word, he shoved Alok hard in the chest.

The push was so sudden and sharp that Alok got no chance to regain his balance. His body jerked backwards and fell onto the floor.

The sound of the fall echoed through the silent classroom.

Ronny immediately stepped forward. He tried to grab Alok and help him up.
“Aren’t you going to stop this, Kabir?”

Saaho instantly stepped in front of Ronny. His voice was loud.
“Boss is already in a bad mood. Why are you getting in the middle? What’s it to you what he does?”

Alok was sitting on the floor. Fear had returned to his eyes. That old fear. He tried to get up with trembling hands.
“Kabir brother… I’m sorry…”

He couldn’t even finish his sentence before Brijesh shoved him again.

This time, Alok’s palms scraped against the rough floor. A sharp line of pain flashed across his face.

Brijesh laughed.
“Hold the boss’s feet… maybe then he’ll forgive you.”

Ronny’s patience had now snapped.
“What kind of bullying is this? He didn’t even say anything to you. If your boss is in a bad mood, should the whole class stop being happy?”

Before his words even finished, Saaho suddenly stepped forward.
And without warning, he punched Alok squarely in the face.

A heavy, dry sound echoed through the entire room.

Alok fell back to the ground. This time, he didn’t move at all for a few seconds.
A thin line of blood trickled from the corner of his lip and started flowing down his chin.

The entire class seemed frozen.
No one stood up. No one spoke. They just watched.

From a few benches away, Riya quietly removed one earbud. Her eyes narrowed. Her face hardened. She was watching it all without blinking.

Ronny bent down again.
“You’re in the wrong, Kabir. This is too much.”

Just as he started to lift Alok up, Brijesh grabbed his collar from behind and yanked him back hard.
“Hit him too, bro!” Brijesh said to Saaho. “Don’t let him go! He was mocking the boss!”

And there, right in the middle of the classroom, Alok — who had done nothing wrong — was getting beaten. Unable to even try to defend himself.

The rest of the room… just watched.
Helpless.
Silent.

At that very moment, the sound of loud laughter came from the corridor.

Light, carefree, unaware.

Rudra and Mayank walked in. Both were laughing about something.
“Seriously, bro… that was so much fun!” Rudra was still laughing.

But as soon as Mayank’s gaze fell on the middle of the class, his laughter stopped abruptly.
He halted mid-step.
“Rudra… look there. They’ve started again. Don’t know when they’ll learn…”

Rudra followed his gaze.
Alok on the floor.
Brijesh holding Ronny.
Kabir standing over them.

The smile slowly faded from Rudra’s face.
His jaw tightened.
“Yeah… nothing ever changes with this Kabir,” he said quietly.

And without another word, both of them moved in that direction.

Chapter 3 – Clash of Egos

Saaho noticed them first.

He tilted his head slightly, like a predator spotting prey from a distance. The corners of his lips slowly turned upwards, spreading a crooked, slanted smile across his face—the kind of smile that comes not from seeing someone, but from seeing someone about to fall.

He looked at Alok, still on the floor. Alok was still trying to get up, breathing heavily, panic swimming in his eyes.

Saaho deliberately raised his voice, so the whole class could hear—
"Alok… who's going to save you from us today?"

There was no mockery in his voice… just the pleasure of toying with prey.

A light murmur spread through the room. Some students turned their heads. Some lowered their eyes.

Then, from behind, came a calm, steady voice—
"Does tormenting someone weaker than you bring you any joy?"

The voice was so composed that for a few seconds, no one understood who had spoken.

Then, everyone's gaze went towards the door.

Rudra was standing.

No anger on his face. No panic in his eyes. No loudness in his voice.
Just a direct question.

Saaho slowly turned. His eyes narrowed.
"Look, Rudra… this is our matter. Don't get in the middle… otherwise—"

Rudra smiled faintly.

It wasn't a provoking smile. It was a smile of confidence.
"Seems you've forgotten the beating from last time."

Mayank, standing beside him, suppressed a very soft laugh. So soft that only Rudra could hear it.

Until now, Kabir, who had been standing silent, stepped forward.

His steps were heavy. His shoes thudded on the floor. His eyes were cold.
“You two… get out of here. Now. If my anger spills over, I’ll break your bones.”

Mayank looked him straight in the eye and said—
“Oh? Keeping two lackeys by your side and thinking you’re the sky now? Pride in your strength is never good, Kabir… a house built on pride doesn’t stand for long.”

A few seconds of silence.

Then—
Kabir, Saaho, and Brijesh burst into loud laughter.

That laughter, mocking and derisive, echoed through the entire room. As if they’d just heard a funny joke.

Brijesh clapped slowly.
“What a speech, bro… my heart’s melted.”

A cold smile played on Kabir’s lips.
“Now you’ll teach us what to do and what not to do? I don’t even like talking to people like you.”

Rudra took a deep breath. He didn’t want to escalate the fight.
“We didn’t come to fight. Just let him go.”

Saaho tilted his head. Challenge was in his eyes.
“Okay. We’ll let him go… if you hold the boss’s feet.”

The sentence wasn’t even complete when—

"Crack!"

The sound was so sharp that two students sitting at the back literally jumped.

Mayank’s hand had landed on Saaho’s cheek.

Saaho’s face jerked to one side from the force. His eyes widened.

The entire room turned to stone for a second.

Then Brijesh lunged.

But before he could, Rudra caught his arm in mid-air.
A sharp tug.
A swift twist.

A pained scream escaped Brijesh’s lips and he fell to one knee.

Now, a stir erupted in the classroom.

Some students stood on their benches. Some leaned forward to see better. As if a match had suddenly started in a stadium.

Rudra, pressing Brijesh further down, said through gritted teeth—
“I told you last time not to mess with me… but you guys are like a dog’s tail. Never straight.”

Kabir had been watching all this until now.

His breaths had grown heavy.

This was the last thing he could tolerate.

Suddenly, he moved forward.
In one swift motion, he grabbed Rudra’s collar.

Breaths were held in the entire room.

At the same moment, Rudra grabbed Kabir’s collar.
Both their fists were buried in each other’s shirts.

Ronny somehow helped Alok up. Riya was now standing. Her eyes were fixed on the two of them without blinking.

A heavy silence fell over the room.

Only the sound of their heavy breathing.

They were so close that their foreheads were almost touching.

Kabir spoke through clenched teeth—
“You think you’re a hero? If I don’t crush this confidence of yours into the dirt today, my name isn’t Kabir.”

Rudra gave a light laugh.
“Confidence can’t be crushed, Kabir. The more you push it down… the higher it rises.”
“What do you think you are? The class messiah? Robin Hood?”
“No. I just can’t stay quiet when I see something wrong. But tell me… do you think you’re some kind of don?”

Kabir’s grip tightened further.
“This is "my" class. What I want, happens here.”

Rudra’s voice was now very quiet.
“The class might be yours… but respect isn’t anyone’s personal property.”
“People tremble when they hear my name!”
“Respect earned through fear… isn’t respect, Kabir. That’s helplessness.”

The entire class behind them was watching, holding their breath.

Even the sound of the fan now seemed unnaturally loud.

Kabir’s voice wasn’t as loud as before now.
It had grown quieter… but in that quietness was a strange chill. Like water flowing under ice—calm, but dangerous.

He stared his eyes into Rudra’s.
“Remember… after today, you will either bend… or break.”

His words held less of a threat, more of a certainty.
As if he was making a prophecy.

Rudra’s breaths were steady now. Face calm. No fear, no panic in his eyes.

He said in a very ordinary voice—

“I don’t know how to bend.
And whoever can break me… hasn’t been born yet.
Use all the strength you have.”

Hearing this reply, the air between them grew even heavier for a few seconds.

Rudra freed his collar with a sharp jerk.
Kabir’s hand was left empty in the air.

Kabir said through gritted teeth—
“You’re playing with fire.”

Rudra replied without blinking—
“Wrong.
I’m putting out a fire.”

Mayank was watching all this from behind. There was a slight gleam in his eyes. He said to himself, very quietly—
“For the first time… someone has answered Kabir back.”

The tension in the room had become so thick you could touch it.

No one was moving.
No one was speaking.
Only the sound of their sharp breaths could be heard.

And then—

"THUD!"

The door flew open with such force that some students actually startled and stood up.

The sound of heels echoed in the corridor—
Tap… tap… tap…

Three clean, measured steps.

And as soon as that sound entered the class…

All the noise, all the commotion, all the heat—stopped instantly.
As if someone had switched off the sound in the room.

The sunlight coming through the window stretched across the floor in a long, golden strip, reaching the door.
Standing in that light was the Dean.

Straight.
Steady.
Eyes sharp.

In her presence, no one needed to say anything.

Her gaze fell directly on Rudra and Kabir—who were still standing holding each other's collars.

One second.
Two seconds.
Three seconds.

In those three seconds, the entire classroom seemed to be standing holding its breath.
Only the heavy breaths of Rudra and Kabir could be heard.

Then the Dean's voice came.
Cold.
Measured.
Such that it needed no shouting.
"Let go. Now."

That voice held a command.
And both of them, at that moment, without a word, slowly released each other's collars.

The Dean's gaze slid from there to Alok.
Blood from the corner of his lip.
Dust on his clothes.
Trembling body.
Ronny standing beside him, holding him up.

She didn’t ask a single question.
Not one.
Just gave the whole class a long look.
A look that held more discipline than words.

“Everyone, take your seats.”

No protest.
No whispering.
Just the slight scraping of chairs.

Then she said in a very normal tone—
“Rudra.
Kabir.
Mayank.
Alok.
All four of you—come with me.”

She paused for a moment.
Then said—
“The rest of the class—silence.”

""The Dean’s Office""

All four walked silently behind the Dean.

The corridor suddenly seemed very long. The notices, posters, department boards on the walls—all seemed to blur. Only the sound of footsteps was clear.
Tap… tap… tap…

The sound of the Dean’s heels echoed ahead, and behind them, the sound of their shoes hit the walls and returned.
No one said anything.

Alok’s breaths were still slightly fast. Mayank’s walk was steady, but his fingers were still trembling faintly. Rudra’s face was calm, but his jaw was clenched. Kabir’s head was slightly bowed—as if he was thinking about something seriously for the first time.

Reaching outside the office, the Dean stopped. Opened the door.
“Come in.”

All four entered.

As soon as they crossed the threshold, the air in the room felt different.

This was the same office they had come to many times—to get certificates signed, to take permissions, for some formal work.

But today…
Today the same room felt heavy.

The medals and certificates decorating the wall no longer looked like decorations—they seemed like witnesses to discipline. The large wooden desk in front, on which everything was placed in perfectly straight lines. Pen stand, files, paperweight—all in their place.

The frame hanging on the wall behind the desk was clearly visible—
“Discipline is not control. It is character.”

All four remained standing.
No one had the courage to sit on a chair without being told.

The Dean sat in her chair. She looked at the four of them for a moment.
Then picked up a small remote from the corner of the desk.

"Click."

The CCTV screen on the side wall suddenly lit up.
The soft light of the room fell on that screen.

Grainy footage began to play.
The same classroom.
The same Alok.
The same shove.
The same punch.
The same grabbing of collars.

All four were watching their own actions on the screen.

There was no sound, but every scene seemed to be screaming.

Kabir's eyes were fixed on the screen. For the first time, restlessness showed on his face.
Rudra stood quietly, but his breaths were a little deeper now.
Mayank was watching intently, as if memorizing every frame.
Alok's fingers were so tightly intertwined that his knuckles had turned white.

The video stopped abruptly.
The screen went black.

The same silence returned to the room.

The Dean gently placed the remote back on the desk.

Her gaze went straight to Kabir.
"Your anger is clearly visible to me."
She paused for a few seconds.
"But tell me—do you come here to study… or to torment others?"

Kabir didn't answer.
His eyes were now on the floor.

Then the Dean's gaze shifted to Rudra.
"And you… you went to stop the fight. Then why did you raise your hand?"
Rudra lowered his head.

Mayank had just moved forward slightly to say something when the Dean placed a finger on her lips.
A small gesture.
"I know exactly what happened. No one needs to explain anything to me."

For a few seconds, only the tick-tock of the clock in the room could be heard.

Then the Dean said in a very calm tone—
"Today, none of you will receive a punishment."

All four looked up together.

Surprise was in Alok's eyes. Kabir raised his head slightly. Rudra looked

straight at her. Mayank stood steady.

The Dean’s voice grew even quieter.
“Today, you are being given a task.”
A small pause.
“And if you fail… then punishment will follow.”

The room suddenly felt even colder.

The Dean slowly opened her drawer.

As the drawer opened, the faint smell of old paper spread in the air.

She reached inside and pulled out an old, yellowed file.

Dust had settled on the edges of the file. The cover was slightly bent. As if no one had touched it for years.

She placed the file very gently on the desk.

All four pairs of eyes fixed on it.

No one in the room even breathed.

On the cover, in thick, faded letters, was written—
""Restricted Area Report — 2009""

Chapter 4 – The Darkness Buried in the File's Pages

The ticking of the clock in the Dean’s office sounded unnaturally clear.

It wasn’t that there were no sounds here before—phones often rang, papers rustled, staff conversed. But at this moment… the silence in that room had become a different entity. Heavy. Pressing.

On the desk lay an old, yellowed file, pulling all four of them towards it.

The dust settled on its corners, the slightly bent cover, the faded colour—all of it said that this file had been locked in the darkness of a drawer for years. As if it had been intentionally forgotten. As if it contained something locked away that no one wanted to remember.

Rudra, Kabir, Mayank, and Alok—all four stood in front.

No one had the courage to sit.

Everyone’s gaze was fixed on that file.

Alok felt like he could hear his own heartbeat in his ears. Mayank’s thumbs were rubbing together slowly. The veins in Kabir’s neck were taut. Rudra’s eyes were steady—but an unusual gravity had settled in them.

The Dean very slowly slid the file towards herself.

Even that slight scraping sound seemed loud in the room.

For a few moments, her fingers hovered over the cover… as if she herself was thinking whether to open these pages again or not. As if a door to memories was about to open.

Then, she opened the file.

The dry, stale sound of paper rubbing echoed in the room.

A faint smell rose from the old papers—a mix of dust, time, and the scent of a closed cupboard.

“The year 2009…” she began reading.

Her voice was normal… but the words carried an unusual weight.

“A special research activity was underway in the Biotechnology Department at that time. Students were called to the research lab at night, under the pretext of showing them a ‘special scientific experiment’.”

Rudra’s attention was completely on the file.

Kabir was no longer leaning against the wall. He stood straight, listening.

Mayank’s hands were clasped together. His thumbs were moving slightly—a sign of his thinking.

Alok’s fingers were trembling, and he felt his palms had become sweaty.

The Dean read further—

“An entire group of B.Tech Biotechnology was called that night. They were told they were going to see something related to their studies… but very special.”

The air in the room grew heavier.

She turned the page.

The sound of paper turning was even sharper this time.

“After that… what happened… is not fully recorded in this report either.”

Silence.

So deep that all four could hear their own breaths.

Rudra couldn’t hold back. He asked in a low voice, “Meaning… there’s no record?”

Without looking at him, the Dean said, “Some things are not recorded. And some… are not left in a state worth recording.”

This sentence hung in the air.

As if bouncing off the walls and returning.

She continued reading—

“After around 12 midnight, there was no response from inside the lab. The door was locked from inside. Even after repeated calls, there was no answer. No sound of any movement, any conversation, or even any scream came from inside.”

Alok’s breath quickened.

The Dean’s voice was growing quieter.

“The staff standing outside the lab thought maybe the students were busy in the experiment. But time passed. 1 AM… 2 AM… 3 AM…”

The ticking of the clock in the room became audible again.

“When the door was broken open towards morning…”

She stopped reading.

For a few seconds, she kept looking at the page.

As if the words ahead were not easy to say.

The four standing in the room felt—what they were about to hear would not be ordinary.

Alok’s breath suddenly hitched. He felt as if the air in the room was running out.

The Dean continued reading—

“In the morning, the door was broken open.”

Her voice was now quieter than before… as if every word was coming out after careful thought.

“Half the students of that group… were not found inside.”

A complete silence froze the room.

Kabir couldn’t hold back. He blurted out— “Meaning they ran away?”

For the first time, the Dean looked directly at him.

Her eyes were steady. Without blinking.

“If someone runs away… their traces are found.”

Kabir’s tongue stopped right there.

“The students who were found outside… were not in a normal state.”

Mayank raised his head for the first time. His brows furrowed.

The Dean said—

“They were not recognising anyone. Not their own friends, professors, staff… anyone. They were irritated by bright light. As if the light was burning their eyes. They were huddling in dark corners. And their behaviour…”

She paused for a moment to choose her words.

“…was not human-like.”

Rudra’s brows furrowed further. “What behaviour?”

The Dean’s voice was now almost a whisper—

“They were growling… baring their teeth… moving on all fours… as if they were wild animals. If anyone came close, they would lunge. They weren’t letting anyone near them.”

Alok’s throat went dry. He felt as if his hands had turned to ice.

“Doctors called it mental trauma. The report said—Chemical accident, gas leak, panic.”

She placed a finger on the file.

“But the people who were present there… knew it was much more than that.”

For a few moments, no one in the room even moved.

Mayank asked in a low voice, “Then… what happened to those students?”

The Dean’s eyes went empty for a few seconds… as if she was seeing an old scene.

“Within a few days… most of them died.”

The air in the room grew even heavier.

“Different causes. Someone’s heart stopped. Someone suddenly fainted and fell. Someone slept at night… and didn’t wake up in the morning.”

The ticking of the clock was now very clear.

“That incident was immediately suppressed. An official report was issued—Chemical accident. The lab was sealed that same day.”

Rudra asked in a low voice, “Ma’am… how do you know all this?”

For the first time, the Dean looked directly at all four of them.

There was a strange depth in her eyes.

“Because I was here at that time.”

All four pairs of eyes rose together.

“I saw them in that state.”

A gleam flashed in her eyes for a moment—not of fear… of memory.

“What was in their eyes… I haven’t been able to forget to this day.”

Such a silence fell over the room that even making a sound felt wrong.

It was then that Mayank asked a calm but direct question—

“Ma’am… why were "we" chosen?”

The Dean looked at him for a few seconds.

Then, in a very low, mysterious tone, she said—

“Some places… don’t let just anyone inside. They choose themselves… whom to call.”

All four looked at each other.

This was an answer… but it made no sense.

Kabir suddenly laughed.

His laughter felt strange in the room’s quietness.

“This all sounds like a story, ma’am. This is a science college, not a horror film. I’m not getting into this nonsense.”

He turned and moved towards the door.

The sound of his steps echoed on the floor.

Just then, the Dean’s voice came—this time sterner, more commanding than before—

“Stop, Kabir.”

Kabir’s steps halted right there.

The Dean said—

“Take one more step, and a full report of what happened in class today will go straight to the administration.”

Her voice wasn’t loud… but it held such a harshness that the words felt like they were hitting the wall and bouncing back.

The silence in the room seemed to freeze solid.

Kabir's steps stopped right there. His back was to the door, but his body seemed to have turned to stone.

Without blinking, the Dean added—

"And believe me… it won't take long for you to be rusticated from college."

This wasn't a threat.

It was a declaration.

Kabir slowly turned.

Now his face didn't have that challenge from a few minutes ago. His jaw was clenched, but a slight unease had entered his eyes.

The Dean looked towards the clock on the wall.

The hands were moving slowly forward.

"Tonight. Ten o'clock."

The heartbeats of all four seemed to quicken in unison.

The quietness of the room now began to echo in their ears. The ticking of the clock was clearer than before… and every second seemed to grow heavier.

Looking into their eyes, the Dean said in very clear, measured words—

"All four of you… will go into that sealed lab tonight."

Hearing this, it felt as if the air in the room stopped for a moment.

This was no longer a conversation.

This was an order.

Alok's lips went dry. He tried to wet them with his tongue, but his throat remained dry.

His voice trembled slightly— “What… is there, Ma’am?”

There was no expression on the Dean’s face.

No fear.
No hesitation.
No haste.

In a calm, flat tone, she said—

“That is exactly what you have to find out.”

This answer was as short as it was heavy.

She closed the file.

The old papers collided. A little dust floated in the air, clearly visible in the thin rays of sunlight coming from the window.

She picked up the file very slowly… and placed it back in the drawer.

The sound of the drawer closing echoed strangely in the room.

As if the final seal had been put on a decision.

“Go,” said the Dean, “prepare. Tonight… will not be ordinary.”

All four stood there for a few seconds.

As if their feet weren’t ready to obey the order.

Then they turned.

Opened the door.

The cold air of the corridor outside hit their faces.

The corridor suddenly seemed abnormally long.

The sound of their steps echoed back after hitting the walls.

Tap… tap… tap…

No one was looking at anyone else.
No one was saying anything.

But the same question echoed repeatedly in the minds of all four—

""What exactly had happened inside that sealed lab… seventeen years ago?""

Chapter 5 – Towards the Jungle

“The Dean reached the doorway…

All four thought the talk was over. Now they just had to leave.

But right at the threshold, she stopped.

It felt as if an invisible memory had caught her steps.

She stood there for a few seconds. Her back was to them, but the atmosphere suddenly grew heavy again.

Slowly, she turned.

The faint sound of her heels echoed on the floor—"Tap"…

The white light of the room fell on her face. Her face was calm, completely normal… but a strange depth had settled in her eyes. As if what she was about to say wasn't just a warning, but an experience.

Her gaze went over each one of them.

First, Rudra.
Then, Kabir.
Then, Alok.
And finally… it came to rest on Mayank.

In a low, measured voice, she said—

‘One more thing…’

All four instinctively halted their steps.

No one asked anything. They just listened.

‘Remember… if this matter reaches anyone outside the four of you…’

She paused for a moment.

The ticking of the clock in the room became clearly audible again.

Her eyes were now particularly fixed on Mayank—as if she was seeing whether he understood the depth of the matter.

‘…then what happened in 2009… something worse will happen to you.’

These words didn’t sound like a threat.

They sounded… as if she was stating a fact.

Silence.

Alok unconsciously pressed his lips together.
Kabir’s neck straightened.
Rudra’s eyes narrowed slightly.

Then the Dean said another sentence—in a very calm tone, but one that would sink straight into the mind—

‘And yes… if you see something strange inside… don’t try to look at it.’

All four looked at her at once.

A faint line appeared on Rudra’s forehead.
Confusion was clear on Kabir’s face.
Alok’s throat went dry.

Mayank couldn’t hold back. He asked in a very low voice—

‘Meaning, Ma’am?’

The Dean didn’t answer.

She just looked at them for a moment.

Then, in a very light, almost whispering tone, she said—

‘Sometimes… the thing that looks at you… you shouldn’t look at it.’

The air in the room seemed to stop.

This sentence was not understood… but it left an impact.

For a few seconds, her gaze remained fixed on them. As if she was making sure this point had settled in their minds.

Then she turned…

And went back inside her cabin.

The door closed.

The faint sound of that closing echoed strangely in the room…

As if the beginning of something had occurred, the real meaning of which they would not understand now… but much later."

"""

"It was 9:40 at night. They had arrived earlier than ordered — none of them wanted to reach exactly at ten.

The back part of the campus was less crowded even during the day, but at night… that place seemed cut off from the world. The street lights reached only as far as the college boundary was considered 'safe'. Beyond that was darkness—thick, quiet, and strangely alive.

A thin footpath emerged from that very darkness.

Towards the old research block.

In that same direction… where the sealed lab was.

All four were walking together.

No one was in a hurry. No one had even said to walk faster.

Yet, steps were automatically becoming quicker—as if the body wanted to reach there before the mind.

The chill of the mountains was dissolved in the air. When breath went in, a coolness was felt in the chest. Somewhere far, clouds were covering and uncovering the moon, and whenever the moon emerged, its light fell brokenly

from the height of the trees—crooked, uneven.

Mobile network had disappeared long ago.

Rudra checked his screen—‘No Service’.

He said with a light laugh, ‘Amazing… even SOS won’t work here.’

No one replied.

Everyone turned on their torches.

Four thin beams of light were trying to cut through the darkness, but the darkness seemed to be deepening instead of retreating.

Light would hit tree trunks and bounce back, and their long shadows began taking strange shapes on the ground—sometimes like a person, sometimes like a crouching animal.

The crunch of shoes on dry leaves was sounding unnaturally clear.

"Crunch… crunch… crunch…"

It felt as if every step was telling the jungle they were coming.

The wind would sometimes suddenly pick up and shake the branches of the trees, and the rustling of leaves would feel strange to the ears. Then suddenly, all would become quiet.

So quiet that even one's own breath began to sound heavy.

Just then…

Some distance away, on the right side, a slight rustling came from the bushes.

The sound was very small… but in that silence, it was enough to startle.

Alok stopped dead.

The beam from his torch, trembling, went in that direction.

‘D-did you hear that?’ His voice was quieter than a whisper.

The other three also stopped.

Rudra shone his light there. Nothing was visible.

The wind blew again. Leaves moved.

But the sound had now stopped.

The jungle became quiet again.

So quiet… as if nothing had been there.

But Alok’s heartbeat had now quickened.

‘Th-there was something over there…’

Alok’s voice caught in his throat. His torch beam, trembling, fell on the bushes, as if even the light was afraid.

Rudra immediately turned his torch in that direction.

‘It’s a jungle, Alok… the wind makes sounds too.’

The sentence was normal… but even his own voice didn’t have the confidence he wanted to show.

For a few seconds, all four stood there. No movement. No sound.

Then they moved forward.

For about five minutes, there was only the sound of footsteps. No talking. No jokes. Just darkness, cold air, and torchlight passing through trees.

It was then that Kabir broke the silence, muttering—

‘Dammit… don’t know what mess I’ve gotten caught in because of you two.’

His voice was low, but irritation was clear.

Rudra immediately looked at him.

‘Between us? Who told you to come?’

Kabir stopped. He lowered his torch.

‘Did I have a choice? You heard that rustication threat.’

Rudra took two steps towards him.

‘So this is the result of your own actions.’

Kabir’s anger began to rise again. His breaths grew heavy.

‘Don’t play the hero. No one’s going to give you a medal here.’

The air became completely still.

Trees still.
Leaves still.

As if the jungle was also listening to their voices.

The two came face to face.

Torchlight fell on their faces—no sparkle in their eyes, just tension.

Mayank immediately came between them. He said, without any panic but in a solid voice—

‘Stop it. This is not a place to fight.’

His voice held neither plea nor order—just a truth, which both of them felt.

Alok also said very softly,

‘Please… not now…’

His voice was trembling.

For a few seconds, the two kept glaring at each other. The torch beams were

shaking, as if even the light was uncomfortable with this confrontation.

Then Kabir looked away. He took a deep breath, turned, and walked ahead without a word.

Rudra stood there for a moment, then he too took a step forward.

Tension was still floating in the air. It felt as if even the cold of the jungle couldn't lessen that tension.

As they walked, Mayank broke the silence—

‘Doesn’t it feel strange to you?’

All three looked at him.

‘Such a big college… hundreds of students… and the Dean chose only us four.’

Rudra said in a low voice,

‘And that too by saying… the place chooses itself.’

This sentence circled in their minds again.

Alok said hesitantly,

‘Meaning… we’ve been called for some reason?’

No one had an answer.

There was only the sound of the wind passing through the trees, like a long sigh.

They walked a few more steps forward.

Just then, the torchlight fell on something rusty.

A crooked iron frame.
An old, half-broken board.

All four went near it.
Wiped the dust with their hands.

The rust had flaked off, the paint had faded… but the words could still be read—

""RESTRICTED ZONE — ENTRY PROHIBITED (2009)""

All four looked at it for a few seconds.

No one said anything.

This no longer felt like a story.

This was real.

Alok’s voice came out with difficulty—

‘Meaning… it’s true…’

His torch beam fixed on the board. His hands were shaking.

What had seemed like a story, a rumour, or part of a scary file until now… had suddenly become solid. In front of them. Touchable.

They moved forward.

The jungle had now become denser than before. Tree branches were intertwined above, covering the sky. The moonlight was now almost gone. The torches were their only support.

The path was becoming narrower.

The air, cold.

And the strangest thing—the further they went, the more it seemed like the sounds of the jungle were decreasing.

No crickets.
No rustling of leaves.
No distant movement of any animal.

Just their footsteps.
"Tap… tap… tap…"

As if the jungle was also listening to them.

As if the trees, the bushes, the wind—all were quietly waiting for their arrival.

About ten minutes later, the torchlight hit something solid among the trees.

A blurred shape emerged.

All four stopped.

The light steadied.

An old building.

Walls half-covered in moss. Plaster peeling off in places. Broken windows, whose glass now remained only as sharp pieces. A rusty iron gate, hanging slightly crooked.

This did not look like an active place.

This was an abandoned place.

A forgotten place.

All four remained standing there.

The torchlight fell straight on the gate.

Between the dust and rust, the faded paint in large letters was still visible—

""BIOTECH RESEARCH LAB""

Below, a yellow caution tape still hung, moving slightly even without wind… as if someone had touched it.

Rudra said in a very low voice—

‘This is it…’

No one replied.

No one stepped forward.

They all just kept looking at that gate.

Inside was complete darkness.

Such darkness… that isn’t formed just by a lack of light. Such darkness that stops light from entering.

The heartbeat of all four echoed in their ears.
"Thump… thump… thump…"

And at that very moment, without anyone saying it, everyone felt the same thing—

Perhaps the Dean hadn’t sent them here…

This place was calling them.
Just as they stepped inside… a loud metallic clang echoed behind them.

Chapter 6 – That Which Lived in the Walls

The gate was closed.

Four pairs of eyes remained fixed on that rusty iron door, which had now become a wall between them and the jungle outside. The torch beams wavered on it, like their breaths.

“Th-this… we didn’t close this,” Alok’s voice trembled. He rushed towards the door without thinking, reaching out to pull it. “It won’t open! It’s locked from inside!”

A shove. A kick. A scream. But the door didn’t even budge. As if it had been welded shut.

Rudra pulled him back. “Stop, Alok! Calm down.” There was panic in his voice too, but he was suppressing it. “Don’t go crazy. It can’t be forced open.”

Kabir moved his torch up-down, left-right. “Is someone here? Show yourself!” His voice held anger, but beneath the layer of anger, a thin crack of fear was clearly visible. “This is some stupid joke! The Dean must have done it! She’s testing us!”

Mayank, leaning against the wall, eyes closed, was taking deep breaths. “No… this isn’t a test, Kabir,” he said softly. “The warning the Dean gave… ‘If something looks at you… don’t try to look at it.’ This is it.”

His words made the air even heavier.

Alok’s body was shaking. “We have to get out of here… get out…” He was muttering, eyes wide.

“And how do we get out?” Rudra said, shining the torch light back on the closed gate. “This way is blocked. If there’s someone else here… or something else… it has locked us in. We have to find another way. Maybe another door, a window.”

“Windows?” Kabir sneered, “Didn’t you notice? The windows of this entire

building are bricked up with cement from the outside. We’re trapped in a sealed box, Rudra.”

This was true. The Dean herself had said—after 2009, the entire lab was sealed. Even the vents were closed.

Just then, a sound came.

"Drip… drip… drip…"

Slow, but clear. The sound of a water drop falling.

All four pricked up their ears. The torch beams all turned simultaneously towards the direction of the sound—the same main hall they were in before, the dark corridor beyond.

“Water’s dripping,” Kabir said, but his voice lacked its earlier confidence.

“In a place sealed for so many years, water from where?” Mayank questioned, eyes now open. His gaze was sharp, his mind racing. “The pipelines here must have been cut off long ago.”

"Drip… drip… d-…"

The sound changed. It wasn’t regular now. There was a drag between the drips, as if a viscous liquid was sliding.

Rudra took a deep breath. “We have to stay together. Don’t separate. Let’s see what’s ahead. Maybe there’s another exit.”

“Are you crazy?” Alok grabbed his hand, “We’re not going there! Stay right here!”

“What will we do standing here?” Rudra removed his hand, but gently. “Alok, it’s okay to be scared. I’m scared too. But there’s victory beyond fear. We can’t just sit here.”

Mayank nodded. “Rudra is right. We have to take action. But carefully. Very carefully.”

Kabir was listening quietly. Suddenly, he pulled out a small Swiss army knife from his pocket. Opening the blade, he said, “Whatever happens, I won’t die without a fight.”

It felt a little strange to the others. Kabir, the bully in class, here finding a sense of security in a knife. But at this moment, any weapon felt like reassurance.

All four, back-to-back, began to slowly step towards that deep corridor. Even combined, the four torch beams couldn’t pierce the thick darkness. Black stains of moisture were spread on the walls. The floor felt sticky.

"Drip… gloop… drip…"

The sound was getting closer.

The corridor ended at a door. This door was different from the others—made of strong wood, with a small window on it, painted black from the inside. A signboard hung above the door, which read:

""MAIN LABORATORY – AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY""

The door wasn’t closed. It was ajar, open by just an inch.

And from it, that sound was coming.

Everyone halted. Only the sound of their breathing could be heard. Rudra looked at Mayank. Mayank signaled with his eyes—‘be ready.’

Rudra gently pushed his foot forward and pushed the door.

The door opened without a creak, with an eerie silence.

The torchlight revealed the horrifying scene inside.

This was the vast lab. On one side were long lab tables, still bearing microscopes, test tube holders, petri dishes, and countless instruments, as if everything had been abandoned in a rush. Notes were still visible on some papers lying on the tables. Chairs were scattered.

But all this was not normal.

On the walls… the terrible walls…

The entire walls were covered in black, red, and brown stains. This wasn’t paint. This was something else, dried, cracked, peeling. In some places, there were long marks, as if an animal had dragged its claws across the wall. The same stains were on the floor, and in the very center of the floor was a large black stain, from where that "drip… drip…" sound was coming.

Above, a broken pipe hung from the ceiling. A thick, black liquid was dripping from it, falling into the same large, congealed stain on the floor. With every drop, a faint steam rose, and the sharp stench of rotten eggs and chemicals mixed and grew thicker in the air.

“God…” Alok covered his mouth. He felt like vomiting.

Kabir’s face had turned pale. He hadn’t even imagined the scene he was witnessing.

Mayank turned his torch towards a table. A lab coat was thrown on it. The coat wasn’t clean. It bore the same black stains. And next to it lay a diary. The name on the cover was – ""Anurag Sharma (Batch 2009)"".

Mayank tiptoed to the table. He picked up the diary. The pages were sticky, as if swollen with moisture. He gently opened the first page.

The handwriting was visible in the torchlight.

""“Project ‘Endogenous Mutation’. Dr. Meera says it will be revolutionary. But the night experiments… I’m scared. Today sample X-7 attacked the wall. It wasn’t dead. It had just… changed.”""

Mayank turned the page.

""“They are lying to us. This isn’t just research. This is something else. Something they dug up from underground. From old mines. It… is alive. And it’s playing with our DNA.”""

The handwriting on the next page was even more panicked, shaky.

""“Tonight is the final injection. Dr. Meera said, either we make history, or are lost to history. I don’t know why I said yes. Everything is going wrong. Voices are coming. In the walls. In the pipes. It’s watching us.”""

The last entry was just one line, in large, sprawling letters, as if the hand was trembling badly while writing:

""“Don’t open this door. It’s out. Help —”""

The writing ended there. The pages after that were empty, or perhaps so filled with stains they couldn’t be read.

Mayank closed the diary. His hand was trembling. He read the entry out loud to everyone.

“This door…” Alok said softly, “…this must be the door that was broken open the night of 2009.”

“And what is ‘it’?” Kabir asked, his voice now holding only fear, not anger. “What thing had gotten out?”

Just then, a sound came from behind a table in the far corner.

"Scrrrrr…"

As if something heavy was being dragged across the floor.

A jolt shot down the spines of all four. The torches immediately turned towards that corner.

There was nothing there. Just an overturned table and the deep shadow behind it.

“Is someone there?” Rudra called out. His voice echoed in the hall and then died.

Silence in response.

Then the same sound. "Scrrrr…" But now from another direction—behind them, near the door.

They spun around quickly.

An empty doorway.

“It’s playing with us,” Mayank whispered. “It’s encircling us.”

Alok’s mind had completely surrendered to fear. Tears began to stream from his eyes. “I want to go home… Mom… I miss my mom…”

Seeing this, something broke inside Kabir. Perhaps for the first time, he realized that Alok was just a scared boy, not a target for his anger. Unconsciously, he placed a hand on Alok’s shoulder. “Calm down. We’re all together.”

That small gesture meant a lot to Alok.

Suddenly, somewhere deep within the sealed walls of the lab, an old backup generator coughed to life with a harsh metallic growl. A second later, the lights in the entire lab flickered.

‘Fzzzz…’ With a sharp sound, …some of the tube lights above lit up, casting a dying-yellow glow across the room. The light flickered weakly, like a lamp on its last breath. But it was enough to lessen their dependence on the torches.

Now they could see the entire lab clearly.

And what they saw was about to make them scream.

On the ceiling… all over the ceiling… were shapes.

Long, crooked, twisted shapes raised on the ceiling plaster. Like vines spreading. But these weren’t vines. They had joints. They were like limbs. Some shapes even had impressions of five fingers, seemingly sunken into the ceiling. It was as if someone had pushed from above the ceiling, or from inside the ceiling, to create these shapes.

“What is this…?” Rudra looked up, his mouth agape.

“There’s something above the ceiling…” Mayank said.

“No,” Kabir said, his voice faltering, “there’s something ""inside"" the ceiling.”

In the flickering lights, those shapes looked even more terrifying. It seemed as if they were moving, slowly, at an inch-per-hour speed.

Then they realized why the lights might have come on.

They noticed that at the other end of the lab, there was another door, which had been hidden in the darkness until now. A red light was glowing above it, and a sign was fixed: ""EMERGENCY EXIT"".

“An exit!” Alok screamed with hope.

But to reach that exit, they had to cross the entire lab. And right in the middle of the lab lay that vast black stain, from where the dripping sound came. The floor around it had cracks in places.

“Look,” Mayank pointed.

Near the emergency exit door, on the floor, something was glowing. A mobile phone. The screen was facing up and a message notification was blinking on it.

""“Run. It is everywhere.”""

The message had no sender number. It just said ‘UNKNOWN’.

“Whose phone is that?” Rudra asked.

“Probably one of the 2009 students,” Mayank said. “But the message… it seems recent. Signal doesn’t come here. So how did this message come?”

They were stunned again. Someone was watching them. Someone was trying to contact them. Or… it was a trap.

"Scrrrr… Clunk!"

This sound came from right above them.

They looked up.

On the ceiling, right above them, that shape… had moved.

In the flickering light, it seemed as if that shape had turned its ‘head’ and now the ‘face’ was towards them. There were no eyes, nose, or mouth, but in the raised plaster were two deep indentations, staring directly at the four of them.

Then, a sound came.

It wasn’t a sound of words. It was a moan. A long, pain-filled, despair-laden moan. It echoed through the entire lab, bounced off the walls, and seemed eager to rupture their eardrums.

This sound was telling them that the pain of what happened here had not ended yet. It was alive here, in these walls, in this ceiling, in this air.

Alok screamed. He covered his ears.

Kabir brandished his knife, but his hand was shaking so much that the knife fell to the floor.

Rudra made a decision. “We have to reach that exit. Now!”

“But the thing on the ceiling—” Mayank said.

“We have to choose! We’ll go crazy standing here!” Rudra grabbed Alok’s hand. “Run! Run straight! Don’t pick up that phone! Just reach the door!”

All four broke into a run together.

The sticky floor made sounds under their feet. As they reached the middle of the lab, the black stain lay before them. They decided to avoid it and go around from the right.

But just as Rudra took a step to turn right…

Something fell from the ceiling.

"Thump!"

It was a thick, black globule that fell and spread on the floor. It was like the liquid dripping from the pipe, but thicker. And from it came a sharp, suffocating stench.

They stopped. The path ahead was blocked.

“Left!” Mayank shouted.

They ran left. But there too, from behind another table, came the same "scrrrr…" sound, and closer.

Now they were trapped in the middle. Ahead was the emergency exit door, but the way to reach it seemed obstructed. And the way they had come from no longer felt safe either.

Just then, the mobile phone lying near the door lit up again.

This time, a video was playing on it. Security camera footage.

The black and white footage showed this same lab. Nighttime. Several students in lab coats were working. A woman in a lab coat was taking notes. Then suddenly everything went chaotic. A student screamed, then another. They started running around. The camera angle tilted upwards and then suddenly fell down. In the last frame, from the fallen camera, only feet were visible—running feet. And then… some other feet. Thin, long, bent at the joints… walking on the wall.

The footage stopped there.

The mobile screen went black again.

The minds of all four had gone numb. It was taking them time to process what they had seen.

“On the wall… they were walking…” Alok muttered.

“So those shapes…” Mayank looked towards the ceiling, “…these are them. Those 2009 students… or whatever they became. They are here. Above us.

Around us.”

Hearing this, everyone’s courage failed. Fear had now become a solid, living thing, choking their breaths.

Suddenly, the emergency exit door shook.

Everyone’s eyes fixed on it.

On the door handle was a hand.

A human hand. Pale, thin, but human.

The door began to slowly swing inward.

Darkness was visible through its crack.

And then a voice came. A human voice. Weak, tired, but clear.

“Come inside… quickly… it’s waking up.”

The door opened fully. Inside was a narrow, dark tunnel-like passage. And standing at its entrance, in front of the flickering red light, was a figure.

It was a man. Or must have been a man once.

His clothes were torn, his body bore marks. His face was terribly gaunt, eyes deeply sunken. But in those eyes, there was still a spark of awareness.

He looked at them and repeated his words.

“If you want to stay alive, come inside. Now.”

The four had no choice. Behind them was the thing on the ceiling, which was now moving more rapidly, as if the ceiling plaster was about to crumble. A humming had filled the air around them, like thousands of flies buzzing.

Rudra announced the decision. “Let’s go!”

All four ran towards that emergency exit. The stranger made way. One by one, they entered that dark tunnel. Rudra went in last.

Before the stranger closed the door, Rudra turned to take one last look.

What he saw would haunt his dreams for a lifetime.

From the ceiling, where that shape was, a large piece of plaster broke and fell. And from behind it… something emerged. A long, black, jointed limb, like a human arm—but not quite. At its end were five long, razor-sharp extensions, like pointed fingers, scraping against the wall like metal on stone and stretching slowly toward the floor.

And then, in that dark, flickering lab, Rudra felt he saw an eye.

A large, black, emotionless eye, staring straight into his eyes.

The door slammed shut.

The last sound they heard from outside was a long, pained moan, mixed with anger, hunger, and an unending sorrow.

Then silence.

Now they were in a completely dark tunnel, with only the sound of their panting and the stranger's sobbing breaths. The torchlight fell on his face.

"You… who are you?" Mayank asked, a tremor in his voice.

The man gave a bitter smile. His teeth were yellow and broken.

"I am the one who didn't die in 2009," he said. "My name is Rohit. Rohit Singh. And if you want to stay alive, listen to me carefully… because you people are the only ones who can end all this now."

Chapter 7: The Truth Inside the Tunnel

In the thick, sticky silence, only the hiss of breaths and the violent thudding of hearts could be heard. That closed door was now just a thin, iron wall between them and the known horror beyond, the last long, broken moan that had come through it—filled with anger, hunger, and a deep, endless sorrow—still frozen in their spines. Rudra, Kabir, Alok, and Mayank now stood in a different world. A dark, damp, and shrunken world, whose air held not just rot, but also a sharp, metallic chemical smell that left a bitterness on the tongue.

The torch beams wavered, dancing on the contours of the stranger's face, who had introduced himself as 'Rohit Singh'. His eyes—deeply sunken, but with an incredibly alive spark in their depths—moved over the faces of each of the four, like an old war veteran assessing new recruits.

Mayank, whose mind was always busy weaving webs of information, connecting chains of cause and effect, was the first to speak. His voice was a little heavier than usual, but had an edge. "You… who are you really? And alone here… for so many years?"

A bitter, tired smile stretched across Rohit's cracked lips. That smile did not reach his eyes. "I am the ghost who remained a witness to that night in 2009. The one who couldn't die… or perhaps didn't gather the courage to die." He took a deep breath, making his thin ribs protrude. "And if your breaths are still under your control, if you still remember your own names even after facing that 'thing', then listen to me carefully. Because you four are the only ones who hold the key to ending this old chapter… this entire curse."

His words held an unshakeable faith, a firm resolve that stood like an anchor in the sea of their own fear.

"But first," Rohit said, leaning his back against the door, "we need to get away from here. This door won't hold it back. It is awake."

Without any further explanation, he turned towards the deep, swallowing soot of the tunnel and started walking. Only the sound of his feet shuffling told which direction he was going.

They had no choice. Behind them was the door, beyond which lay the unimaginable. Ahead, only this stranger and a dark cave. Without looking at each other, with a silent agreement, they followed him. The sound of their steps—sliding in the sticky dampness—drowned in the echo of the tunnel.

This tunnel was like the building's arteries. This place, built for old heating pipes, electrical ducts, and perhaps secret chemical disposal, was now rotting. The walls were cold and sweating, a muddy, brown water dripping constantly from them. The sound of "drip… drip…" wasn't completely regular. Sometimes several drops fell together quickly, then a long interval of silence. It felt as if the building itself was oozing from its wounds. The air smelled of mold, rotten wood, and a strange, sweetish rot—like the mixed taste of decaying flesh and antiseptic. The smell was so heavy that Alok wrapped his shirt collar around his mouth, but the smell seemed to seep into the skin, making him nauseous.

Wherever the torch beams went, they revealed a distorted life. Abnormally large, black, glossy cockroaches ran swiftly on the walls, disappearing into cracks as the light hit them. Some insects were like those you wouldn't see outside a science magazine—small, crawling, with transparent bodies and a green liquid visible inside. In some places, clusters of white, eyeless bugs clung to the damp walls, vanishing when the light fell. The floor was carpeted with thick, velvety black mold, which squelched under their shoes, leaving a strange warmth.

After walking for about ten minutes, Kabir suddenly stopped. He raised a hand, closed his mouth. His eyes were dazed, ears taut. "Wait… listen."

Everyone froze. Nothing but the dripping and their panting breaths. Then the sound came—a deep, long, raspy growl. It wasn't the growl of a dog or cat. It was more "hollow", more "desolate". Like air pressure escaping from the mouth of a vast, empty tunnel. The sound came from afar, from that direction of the tunnel where no one had gone yet, but it held such a sense of proximity that it felt encased in the walls around them.

Alok's body stiffened instantly. His breaths became fast and short, eyes wide with terror. "No… it's here too… it's here too!" He muttered, and then, surrendering to mindless fear, he ran backwards, towards the same closed

door they had come from. His feet slipped, he fell, got up immediately, and started pulling at the door's bolt with both hands, even though they knew it was locked.

"Alok, stop, you fool!" Kabir's roar echoed in the tunnel. He took two long strides to reach Alok, grabbed his shoulders, and spun him around forcefully. "What's behind, understand? That big hand! That eye! At least here there's this man!" Kabir's face was red with anger, but his eyes held not anger, but a firm, desperate worry—a kind of worry that was new to him.

"But I can't, Kabir!" Alok screamed, tears carving paths on his dust-smeared face. His voice was breaking. "I'm even scared of the dark! I'm scared of lizards! All this… this hell… I can't bear it! Why is this happening to me?"

Kabir looked at him. "Really" looked. The Alok he used to tease in class, whose every move he'd laugh at, whom he thought was the weakest, most useless boy in the world, was now a completely broken, suffocating human being in his fear. Something shifted in Kabir's chest. The hard lines on his face softened a little. His voice, which was a roar until now, suddenly became low and flat. "You're not alone, understand? We're all trapped here. I'm here. Look," he raised his hand, still smeared with grime. "If you run, you'll die alone. No one will help you. Stay together. Just… stay together."

Hearing such words from Kabir was unbelievable for Alok. He nodded hesitantly, wiping his tears. Kabir gave an awkward, heavy pat on his back—an attempt not to comfort, but to say 'I'm here.'

Rudra and Mayank were watching all this quietly. A different feeling welled up in Rudra's mind towards Kabir—perhaps respect. He stepped forward, turning to Rohit, who was watching this entire scene with a quiet, weary patience. "Enough. Enough now." His voice had the pressure of a leader. "Now it's your turn, Rohit. Tell us everything. What happened here? What is that thing that crawls in the walls? And most importantly… why have just the four of us been chosen? Especially him?" He gestured towards Alok.

Rohit took a long, painful breath, as if preparing himself to touch a very old and painful truth again. He slowly sat down leaning against a damp tunnel wall, his back showing a slight tremor. The others, exhausted and mentally

shattered, also sat on the ground around him. The lights of the four torches combined to form a small, warm circle of light, pushing back the surrounding dense darkness a little.

"The year 2009," Rohit began, his voice gone completely flat, as if reading a report. "I was a junior research assistant in the Biotechnology Department. Under Dr. Meera Sharma. The project's codename was 'Endogenous Mutation'. On the surface, it was research on an advanced gene-editing technique that could cure genetic diseases. But the reality… the reality was something else."

"That thing that was found underground?" Mayank immediately asked, remembering that entry from Anurag Sharma's diary.

Rohit looked at Mayank with surprise, then nodded slowly in a quiet yes. "You know… good. Yes. Dr. Meera had found a… 'sample' in the nearby old, closed coal mines. An ancient, semi-living organic substance. We called it 'Anomaly X'. It wasn't stone. It wasn't alive either. It was in some intermediate state. In a deep dormant state. And its most terrifying property was… it reacted to human DNA upon contact. It would… "read" it, and then mutate it randomly, at an extremely rapid rate."

He pulled up the sleeve of his torn, dirty coat. In the torchlight, dense black and blue marks were visible on his arm, spreading like roots under the skin. Where these marks ended, the skin had become hard and scaly. Everyone's breath caught.

"That night," Rohit's voice acquired a tremble, "we planned the final experiment. Selected students were called. They were told they were about to witness a historic, revolutionary medical experiment that would change humanity. Dr. Meera was glowing with excitement. We all were. We were going to become gods." A glimpse of the old enthusiasm flashed in his voice for a moment, immediately drowned in bitterness.

"We activated 'Anomaly X' in a special electro-chemical solution. The start was fine. Then… then something happened. It started reacting "on its own". It was out of control. It started growing… spreading. Breaking its container, it became a protoplasmic mass, a living, breathing pudding that assimilated

everything. And then… it "attacked"."

Rohit's eyes widened, his pupils dilated with fear, even though the event was years old. "It wasn't an animal that bites or kills. It… it "assimilated". It pounced on the students who were closest… Anurag, Priya, Vikas…" His voice choked. He closed his eyes. "It swallowed them. Completely. Their screams suddenly stopped. And then… then with those people it had touched, or whose skin its droplets had fallen on… their DNA… began to distort. It was a rapid, painful process. Bones cracked and twisted, skin hardened like leather, mentality… mentality dropped to a primitive, animalistic level. They began crawling on walls and ceilings, growling at their own companions. We couldn't believe what we were seeing. This wasn't science… this was hell."

"And you?" Rudra asked softly, "How did you survive?"

"I… I was far," Rohit said, opening his eyes. "Behind a steel cabinet, recording data logs. Maybe it didn't even see me. Or maybe something about my body's chemistry… my blood… was "tasteless" to it. When everything quieted down, those transformed students… they went behind the walls, into ventilation shafts, into spaces above the ceiling. The original mass also… slowly assimilated into them, in a way. They were no longer separate entities. Became a collective consciousness… of pain, confusion, and an insatiable hunger." Rohit buried his head in his hands, his fingers tangled in his hair. "When people from outside came… administration, doctors… they were helpless in front of what they saw. They sealed the lab. Made it a tomb. I thought I would slowly starve to death, or go mad. But I didn't die. I took refuge in this tunnel, built for old steam lines and chemical waste disposal. And since then… I have been here. Listening to its growls. Feeling its presence through the vibrations in the walls. A watchman guarding his own prison."

A heavy silence fell as his story ended. The story had given shape to that vague fear, made it solid, real, and a hundred times more terrifying.

"But your body… these marks…" Mayank asked, his scientific intellect still active, "Why didn't you fully transform 'into it'?"

Rohit looked at the marks on his arm, like looking at an old war scar. "The

infection happened. But not completely. Maybe there was a rare genotype in my blood… or perhaps the medicines I took had some effect… or maybe just luck. I changed, but not fully. My mind… my ability to think, my memories… they remained. Perhaps that is why I was waiting for you. Perhaps that is why I can help you."

"Help us?" Kabir said, standing up, his voice full of desperation. "We are the ones trapped in this web! We just need to get out!"

"No," Rohit shook his head firmly, standing up himself. "You are not trapped. You were "chosen". Forced to come here."

These were the same words the Dean had said. Rudra immediately stepped forward and asked, "Why? What is so special about the four of us? Especially about him?" He gestured towards Alok, who was still scared, but sitting near Kabir. Everyone's eyes fixed on Alok.

Rohit looked at Alok. This time his gaze held a strange softness, an understanding. "Because this 'Anomaly'… it doesn't just connect to physical DNA. It also connects to the frequencies of "emotions". Fear, terror, trauma, deep sorrow… these are all sources of energy for it, beacons. It is drawn to people who are… sensitive. Whose emotional wavelengths match its own distorted wavelengths. Your fear, Alok… your pure, unadulterated, physical fear… it makes you a shining torch for it. Like a lighthouse in a dark sea. And you three…," his gaze went to Rudra, Kabir, and Mayank, "you are connected to it. Perhaps there is a deep trauma in your past, a hidden fear, whose echo matches this place. Dean knew this. She knew your psychological profiles. That's why she chose you. Or perhaps… this place chooses you itself, and the Dean is just the one opening the door."

The answer left everyone stunned. Alok's eyes held fear along with a strange sense of recognition—had his own fear really brought him to this hell? Kabir's face darkened, his brows furrowed, as if an old, buried memory had been suddenly dug up. Mayank was lost in thought, perhaps flipping through pages of his own past. Rudra took a deep breath, digesting this heavy information.

"Alright," Rudra said, in a leadership stance. "So now what? You said we can

end this. Show us the way."

Rohit pulled out a yellowed, crumpled, moisture-soaked sheet of paper from the inner pocket of his torn coat. It was a handwritten lab diagram, filled with chemical formulas and calculations. "There is only one way—to send the 'Anomaly' back to its stable, inactive state. A neutralizing agent. Dr. Meera had formulated its structure, but didn't get the chance to synthesize it. I have tried to make it here, hiding, with leftover chemicals, for years. I have gathered most of the material. But the final component… a special protein enzyme… was kept only in the main lab's deep-freeze. Right there, where we just fled from."

"You mean we have to go back into that same lab?" Alok's voice trembled again, terror returning to his eyes.

"No," Rohit said immediately, "There's another way to reach the main lab. This tunnel opens into an old storage room, directly connected to the back of the lab. It was used in the early days of the project. There, in a fireproof cabinet, perhaps that enzyme is still safe. Come, we have little time."

They started walking again. The tunnel grew even narrower, sometimes they had to crawl on their knees. Cold water droplets were now falling constantly from above, their clothes were getting wet. The distant growl came occasionally, but didn't get closer. There was a strange thing—it felt as if that 'thing' was watching them, keeping an eye on their every step, but deliberately holding back from attacking, like a cat playing with a mouse.

After about twenty minutes of difficult, arduous travel—which included climbing, crawling, and scary dark corners—the tunnel suddenly widened and ended at a door. This door was of thick iron, heavily rusted, with a large bolt in the middle. Rohit, using his remaining strength, slid the bolt. With a sharp, screeching sound, the door swung inward.

Inside was a medium-sized room. It was clearly a storage room. All around were boxes covered in thick layers of dust, crates of broken glassware, and empty chemical metal drums. The air smelled of dust, old books, and stale plastic. In one corner was a sturdy steel table, with some leftover lab equipment on it—a small, old centrifuge, some glass pipettes, a Bunsen

burner, and a stainless-steel tray on which several vials, syringes, and glass ampoules were arranged.

"This has been my… refuge," Rohit said, with a little embarrassment. "I tried to prepare that antidote here." He gestured towards the table.

Mayank immediately went to the table, throwing his torchlight on the equipment. He carefully picked up an ampoule. It was empty. He looked at another—empty. Third, fourth… all of them. He checked the syringes—all empty. "Everything is empty, Rohit," Mayank said, disappointment in his voice. "That enzyme… it's not here."

Rohit's face fell instantly. The little spark of hope in his eyes also died. "No… this can't be. I kept it right here, in this table's drawer…" He began searching frantically around the table, opening drawers, turning over boxes. His panting breaths grew faster.

Just then, Kabir's torch, which was aimlessly sweeping the room, suddenly stopped at a large, deep shadow behind a tall pile in another corner. Kabir didn't make a sound. His hand just froze.

Slowly, the lights of all the others also came to rest on the same corner.

A corpse was lying on the floor there. But this was no ordinary human corpse. It was the size of a stout man, but its body was covered in dense, long brown-black hair, looking like a bear's pelt. The facial outline was human, but the jaw was unnaturally wide and protruding forward, showing long, yellow teeth underneath. The limbs were thick, muscular, and paw-like, nails thick and curved like claws. Clothes—a torn lab coat and jeans—hung on the body, bearing deep, dried bloodstains and slash marks.

But the most heart-wrenching thing was that the corpse looked absolutely fresh. No decay. No smell. The skin (or hair) still had a dull sheen. As if death had occurred only a few days ago.

A silence so deep that they could hear the sound of their own blood flowing in their arteries.

Rohit's breaths stopped. His lips turned white. "This… who is this?" he

whispered. "After 2009… no one came inside! I was alone… just me!"

Mayank said softly, in that cold and harsh voice of logic that makes the truth even more terrifying: "The Dean had said. She clearly said that after the 2009 incident, this lab was sealed forever. No one came, no one left. But this corpse… it doesn't even look a week old."

A horrific, slowly dawning suspicion emerged in Rudra's eyes. His throat went dry. When his voice came out, it was completely flat, heavy, and ice-cold. He asked the question, the answer to which was perhaps about to shatter their world.

"So… did Dean lie to us?"

The air in the room seemed to freeze. And then, not from far, but from the very depths of the tunnel they had just emerged from, that growl echoed again. This time it wasn't a distant noise. It was clear, distinct, and extremely close. And in it now, there wasn't just hunger, but the scent of a victorious, predatory being.

Chapter 8 – Out of the Labyrinth

That deep, triumphant growl shattered the frozen air of the room. It was no longer distant. It was at the mouth of the tunnel, right behind the door they had just come through. Its voice held a gravelly texture, as if pebbles were being dragged, and beneath it was a hunger that made everyone's soul tremble.

"Out! Now!" Rohit screamed, suppressing his shock and fear in an instant. He threw one last astonished look at the fresh corpse, then pointed towards the other end of the room, where some iron boxes were leaning against a wall. "There! There should be another way out!"

Rudra pushed Alok and Mayank ahead without wasting a moment. Kabir picked up a heavy iron pipe lying on the ground, his fists white. They ran behind the boxes. Rohit quickly opened a hidden, rusted hatch set into the floor. Below was more darkness, and a putrid, damp air wafted up.

One by one, they descended into the narrow hole. Rohit went last, and with his full weight, slammed the hatch shut from above. At that very moment, a terrible sound of twisting and tearing iron came from the direction of the door.

The place below was even tighter. It looked like a basement, perhaps built for old sewer lines or chemical waste dumping. The air now smelled sharply of sewage and chlorine. The torchlight revealed a long, low corridor ahead, its walls covered in green-black slime.

They ran quickly. Their feet slipped several times because the floor was covered in slippery moss. From behind, the sound of violent impacts on the hatch was heard—'Thud! Thud! Thud!'—accompanied by the screech of bending iron. That 'thing' was behind them.

The corridor suddenly split into two. One path went upwards, the other downwards. "Up! We need to get out!" Rudra said.

"Wait!" Rohit said, panting. "The upper path leads to the main building's basement, which is sealed. The lower one... I'm not sure, but maybe there's a way out."

'Thud! Crash!' The sound of the hatch breaking came from behind. Now there was no choice. They ran into the lower path.

This path was even wetter and more disgusting. Water was collected in places, with strange things floating in it. Just then, the light fell on something on the right wall—a rusted, thick-barred cell-like structure. It was a small prison-cell, perhaps once used to keep animals for experiments. On its floor, behind the bars, lay another corpse. This one looked even fresher. The clothes were modern—jeans and a shiny jacket. The face was mutilated beyond recognition, but the hair was short and stylish. And the most horrifying thing —next to the corpse lay a new-looking mobile phone, its screen cracked.

"God... this is..." Alok's voice trailed off.

"Come on! Don't look!" Kabir dragged him.

But that image had left an imprint on their minds. Someone else had been here. Recently. The Dean's lie was now as clear as a line drawn in stone.

The corridor ended abruptly, opening into a large, round sewer line or drain. Below was a stagnant flow of black, filthy water, disappearing into the distant darkness. The sounds of crawling and dragging were getting closer from behind. That same growl echoed in the air, now more excited, more near.

"This is the only way," Rohit said, panting, a decisive glint in his eyes. "This pipe connects to the campus's main sewer line, and then goes out towards the river."

"In this dirty water?" Alok said fearfully.

"There's a difference between living and dying, Alok!" Rudra said. He first put his torch in his mouth, and without hesitation jumped into the black, stinking water. The water was knee-deep, cold, and slimy. Mayank and Kabir grabbed Alok and pulled him along. Rohit looked back one last time—in the deep darkness, several jointed, crooked limbs were rapidly moving towards them along the wall. He also jumped.

They ran through the pipe, the water swallowing their shoes. A scream was

heard from behind—filled with anger and desperation. They didn't look back. They just ran. The pipe twisted repeatedly, split into two, then merged again. There was almost no air. Breathing was becoming difficult. Alok was panicking, but Kabir was holding his hand tightly.

Suddenly, a faint point of light appeared in the distance. A gust of fresh air came. They used their last strength. The light grew. They emerged from a metal grate installed at a riverbank. Fresh night air touched their faces. They collapsed on the bank, panting, trembling, their clothes soaked in filthy water and mud.

Rudra looked around. They were on the bank of the river behind the campus, not far from the jungle. City lights glittered in the distance. He looked at his companions—all safe. Then his gaze fell on Rohit. "Rohit, you... are you okay?"

Rohit nodded, but his face was very pale. "I... I shouldn't come with you. I... I'm still infected. You guys go. Meet the Dean. Tell the truth. And... thank you." Saying this, he turned and walked towards the jungle, a limping, solitary figure who vanished into the darkness.

"Wait!" Rudra called out, but Rohit didn't stop, he disappeared.

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Rudra's eyes opened to a blurry, white ceiling. A sharp, white light dazzled his eyes. His body felt a strange heaviness, and his head ached slightly. He was on a hospital bed, an IV drip in his arm. He looked around. On the next bed was Kabir, who had just woken up and was looking around in surprise. On the other side, Mayank was sitting, holding his head. Alok was still sleeping, but his face was peaceful.

The door opened and Dean walked in, a doctor and a nurse with her. The Dean's face was worried, but her eyes... her eyes were completely calm, inscrutable.

"You're awake," the Dean said, her voice normal, caring. "You were found unconscious by the riverbank. Mild dehydration and shock. Tell me, what happened?"

Rudra shook his head, trying to sit up on his elbows. His voice came out cracked. "Rohit... where is Rohit Singh?"

The Dean exchanged a glance with the doctor, then looked at the four boys. "Rohit Singh? You mean that student from the 2009 batch? Rudra, Official files list Rohit Singh as having died in that accident — that is what the records say. In truth, many records from the project were falsified and the real story had been buried."

The statement hit like a slap. Mayank and Kabir also looked on in shock.

"No! He was with us!" Kabir said, sitting up on his bed. "He saved us! From the tunnel! He told us everything—Anomaly X, Dr. Meera, everything!"

The Dean gave a sorrowful smile, as if listening to children. "You've been through severe trauma. Sometimes the mind concocts such stories, especially when we are terrified. The doctor says you need rest."

Rudra said angrily, but in a weak voice, "This is not a story! We saw! There were fresh corpses there! In a prison-cell! Someone else has been there, recently! You said no one went after 2009!"

The Dean's face grew serious. She gestured to the doctor and nurse, and they left the room. As the door closed, the Dean's demeanor changed. She became completely calm, grave. "You will be moved to a private room. Rest. Then we'll talk. Not now."

She turned to leave.

"Ma'am!" Rudra said, "We need to talk in private. Now."

The Dean stopped. Slowly turned. Her eyes weighed something, then she nodded. "Alright. Doctor, discharge them. They are fine."

A little while later, the four of them were sitting in the Dean's cabin. Four cups of tea were placed in front, untouched. The Dean sat facing them, her gaze direct and sharp.

"Tell me," she said.

Rudra narrated the entire story. The gate closing, the main lab, the diary, the shapes on the ceiling, meeting Rohit, the tunnel, the fresh corpses, the prison-cell, escaping through the drain... everything. Mayank and Kabir added necessary details.

The Dean listened quietly, no expression on her face. When Rudra finished, a long silence fell.

"So you're saying," the Dean said softly, "that I lied to you? That the place is not sealed? That I knowingly sent you to a place where people have died recently?"

"Yes," Rudra said directly. "Rohit said you knew. You chose us."

The Dean picked up her teacup, took a sip. Then she said, "Listen, children. After 2009, that lab was indeed locked. Officially. But... yes, I was lying when I said no one went inside. Because I myself didn't know."

This admission was startling.

"What do you mean?" Mayank asked.

"It means that the one who sealed that lab, the one who suppressed that incident... it wasn't me. It was the administration. There were some people who wanted to keep that research, that 'Anomaly X', secret. I was told everything was shut down. I never had access to what the Chancellor continued in secret. But hearing your account... it seems some people have still been going there. Perhaps to take samples, perhaps to continue the research... and perhaps, they met the same fate." There was genuine surprise and regret in the Dean's voice. "I sent you because I thought you four were the only ones who could understand that place's 'signature'. I thought you'd bring back some evidence, something I could use to shut down that project forever. But I didn't think your lives would be in such danger. I apologize."

This answer didn't match their expectations. They couldn't understand if the Dean was telling the truth or weaving another web.

"Now you all rest," the Dean said, getting up. "Don't speak of this to anyone. Or your careers, your safety, everything will be at risk. Understood?"

She left. The four kept looking at each other.

"Do you believe her?" Kabir asked.

"No," Rudra said. "But that prison-cell corpse... what about it? Someone should see it!"

"And Rohit?" Mayank said, "Where did he go? Was he real, or... did our minds create him?"

They began forming different theories. Perhaps Rohit was a ghost. Perhaps it was all a collective hallucination. Perhaps the Dean was telling the truth. Perhaps not.

They didn't know that the Dean, right outside the door, was quietly listening to their conversation. When she heard the word 'prison-cell', a very faint, mysterious smile stretched across her lips. She walked away slowly, with that smile.

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The next few days were strange for everyone. They had to tell their families they had gone for a college night exhibition and stayed out. Surprisingly, no one's family asked many questions. Rudra's mother said, "Good you told me. Dean Ma'am had called and told us everything, that you were working on a project."

Hearing this, a shiver ran down Rudra's spine. The Dean had already covered everything up.

He went to the gym, tried lifting weights, hoping the physical stress would leave his mind. But every time he closed his eyes, he saw that black, emotionless eye that had been watching him in the lab.

Mayank sat in his room, searching on his laptop for 'Endogenous Mutation', 'Dr. Meera Sharma', '2009 lab accident'. All information was vague; official reports described everything as a 'chemical leak'. But in an old newspaper archive, he found a small news item: "Talented student Rohit Singh goes missing, family demands justice." The date was 2009. The case was later

quietly closed and marked as ‘presumed dead’.

Kabir was at an old pub in the city, with his cronies Saaho and Brijesh. They were asking, "Hey, where were you for so many days? Did something happen? How did you get this cut on your hand?"

Kabir looked at his hand, where a sharp object had scratched him in the tunnel. He took a big gulp. "Nothing. College work." The Dean's warning echoed in his ears. He noticed that a cuff of a new, shiny jacket was peeking out of Brijesh's pocket... exactly like the jacket on the corpse in the prison-cell. His breath caught. He put down his glass. "I have to go," he said, and walked out without another word, ignoring his friends' calls.

And Alok... Alok was in his room, wrapped in a thick blanket. He was looking out the window. Not trembling in fear like before. But lost in deep, focused thought. Rohit's words echoed in his mind—"Your fear... makes you a beacon for it." Was his fear really a weakness? Or... was it a strength? A sense others didn't have? He knew something had changed now. He was still afraid. But now there was a new understanding with that fear. And perhaps, a small spark... of change.

Chapter 9: Dance in the Shadows

The morning sun fell on the college's old stones, but to Rudra, that light felt false. Behind everything—the dew drops on the lawn, the glint of the library windows, the sound of students laughing—there was an invisible layer, that terrible truth running through his veins like poison. He and Mayank stood in a far corner of the lawn, where an old peepal tree sat spreading its roots, as if listening to their conversation.

Mayank took off his glasses, wiping them with the edge of his shirt. It was a nervous habit. "I thought all night," he said, his voice so quiet the leaves of the nearby tree couldn't hear. "About Rohit... that newspaper clipping... it said 'missing', not 'dead'."

Rudra kicked a stone with the tip of his shoe. "So he was real. And what we found wasn't just our minds." He clenched his fist, nails digging into his

palm. "But the Dean... why is she denying it? Why is she lying to our families?"

"Control," Mayank said, putting his glasses back on. His eyes looked large and serious. "She wants to keep us scared. Helpless. So we do what she says. Just wait and see... something will happen today that proves we're in her grip."

Their conversation felt like a dreadful wait—like the stillness in the air before a storm.

The classroom atmosphere was always noisy, but today Kabir's silence created a different sphere around him. He was leaning back in his seat, brows slightly furrowed, eyes looking far out the window at the endless sky. He wasn't the same Kabir who commented on every class activity, laughed loudly, teased others. This was a new Kabir—quiet, deep, and dangerously aware.

His cronies Saaho and Brijesh sitting beside him were uneasy. Brijesh kept adjusting the cuff of his new jacket—a shiny black one with a silver zip. Saaho tried to make a joke, "What happened, boss? You're so quiet today, like someone..."

Kabir looked at him. Just looked. Didn't answer. But that look held so much weight that Saaho's words remained stuck in his mouth. Brijesh noticed the scratch on Kabir's hand—the same scratch from the tunnel. For a moment, something flashed in his eyes, maybe recognition, maybe fear. But he said nothing.

Just then, the door opened.

All eyes went to the door. Alok entered. He was late to class for the first time. But surprisingly, he wasn't panting or embarrassed. His steps were slow, measured. His eyes—which were always wide with fear—were smaller today, alert. He looked like an animal sniffing its new environment, analyzing every sound, every movement.

He moved towards his seat. His bag slung on his shoulder tilted slightly and the water bottle inside slipped out. It didn't fall softly. With a thick, clumsy

'thump', it fell to the floor. The cap, which wasn't closed properly, came off. Dirty, slightly brown water (probably from yesterday) started spreading in a small rivulet—and went straight onto Kabir's new, milky white shoes.

For a moment, time seemed to stop.

Everyone saw it. Then Saaho's voice tore through the silence. "Hey! Oy! You got eyes or what?" He stood up, his face turning red with anger.

Brijesh also stood up. His eyes were fixed on Alok, measuring him. "You deaf? Boss's shoes... are new. Who's gonna clean them now? You, right?" He stepped forward to grab Alok's shirt collar.

Alok stepped back. Fear was on his face, but it wasn't the mute, crying fear of before. This was an active, alert fear. He wanted to say something, but the words still wouldn't come out.

The whole class held its breath. This was the scene they were used to—Kabir's gang targeting someone. But today was different.

Just then, chair legs scraped on the floor. A voice echoed, not harsh, not shouting. Completely flat, iron-solid. "Let him go."

Kabir was standing. He was looking at Brijesh's hand, which was an inch from Alok's collar. "Let go," he repeated.

Brijesh was stunned. "But boss, he..."

"I said, let go." There was a rebuke in Kabir's voice. "If you're going to hit someone, tell me. I'll deal with it myself." Then he turned to Alok. His eyes said something—maybe 'go away'. "Go on, Alok. Sit in your seat."

Alok looked into Kabir's eyes for a second. They didn't have the malice from before. There was a strange understanding. He nodded slightly and quickly went to sit down.

A buzz spread through the class. Students looked at each other. What happened? Kabir helped Alok? It was like something from a science fiction movie. Brijesh and Saaho stood dumbfounded, unable to understand their

leader's changed form.

Rudra and Mayank looked at each other. They weren't surprised. They felt a sense of relief. In that tunnel, in that fear, something had broken—perhaps the mask Kabir had worn for years. And something had connected—an invisible thread binding the four of them.

Just then the door opened and the Chemistry professor—Dr. Khanna—walked in. Class began. Everything seemed normal, until Dr. Khanna asked about the homework.

"Yesterday's assignment? Submit it."

The class took out their notebooks. Rudra, Mayank, Kabir, and Alok looked at each other. They hadn't done anything yesterday. How could they? They had just come out of hell.

Dr. Khanna looked towards the four. His eyes, which were always strict and rule-bound, were saying something else today. A slight smile played on his lips. "You four haven't done it?"

Silence in the class. Everyone knew what would happen next—scolding, threats, being sent out.

But Dr. Khanna just shook his head. "No problem. Submit it by tomorrow."

This small sentence exploded like a bomb. The whole class was stunned. This had never happened! Dr. Khanna didn't give concessions to anyone!

The eyes of Rudra, Mayank, Kabir, and Alok met. This wasn't a concession. This was a message. A warning. "The Dean's signal." She was watching them. By giving them 'special' status, she was reminding them they were in her palm, and she could crush them whenever she wanted. This wasn't generosity, it was pressure.

Just before class ended, the door opened again. And this time, Dean Sharma herself entered the room. Her presence seemed to drop the room's temperature. Everyone fell silent.

"I have an announcement to make," she said. Her voice was sweet, but behind that sweetness was an iron hardness. "Starting tomorrow, the college will host a week-long 'Navratri Dandiya Festival'. All classes are suspended. The entire campus will be decorated. DJ, food, dance—all kinds of entertainment. This is a mandatory... co-curricular activity."

A wave of joy ran through the class. Shouts, claps, excited voices. But the four boys sitting in four corners remained frozen like ice statues. This wasn't a festival. This was another trap.

Finishing the announcement, the Dean swept her gaze directly over the four of them. And then, very lightly, in a way barely visible, the corners of her lips turned up. "She smiled."

That smile was like an ice needle piercing Rudra's spine. It was saying —'Have fun. Dance-sing. But remember... I'm above you. You are mine.'

Class ended. The teacher stopped the four of them. "You have to participate in the dandiya. This is an order." An order. There was no choice. With a false smile, they agreed.

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The next day, the campus was unrecognizable. Colored flags, flower garlands, swaying bulbs. As night fell, the DJ music started—loud beats creating vibrations in the air. It was all so overpowering that it felt like the college was deliberately spreading so much noise and light to hide its dark secrets.

Rudra and Mayank arrived together. Rudra wore simple but stylish black clothes that accentuated every angle of his trained body. As soon as he entered, he became the center of attention for many girls. Mayank also looked clean and presentable. They stood under a tent, trying to understand the scary politics behind this festival. "This is all a spectacle," Mayank said, holding a glass of lemonade. "And we are the puppets on the stage."

Kabir arrived with his cronies. He wore simple jeans and a white shirt, which suited his tall frame well. "Wow boss! Looking like a hero today!" Saaho said. Kabir just gave a slight nod. His eyes were searching the crowd for the

Dean. Brijesh wasn't there. Kabir tried calling, but there was no answer. A strange restlessness was on his face.

Then Alok arrived. He had dressed up well—new shirt, well-styled hair. But no one recognized him in the crowd. He stood alone, until Rudra saw him and gestured. The four gathered again. "We have to stick together," Rudra repeated. There was agreement in everyone's eyes. They were a team, however reluctantly formed.

Just then, a shining figure moved towards them from the crowd. Riya. She wore a traditional lehenga, embroidered, with flowers in her hair. She looked so beautiful that Alok's mouth hung open. His breath caught.

Riya went straight to Rudra and Mayank. "Hi! You guys came too!" Her voice was musical. Then her gaze fell on Alok. A moment's pause. Then a real, warm smile bloomed on her face. "Hi Alok. You're looking good too." It was a small, simple compliment, but for Alok it felt like winning the whole world. His heart started beating fast, a warmth spread on his cheeks. He could only smile. Riya chatted a little more and then turned to go to her friends. As she left, her small purse, hanging from her shoulder, fell.

Alok immediately bent down and picked it up. "Here," he said, his voice a little shaky.

"Thank you, Alok!" Riya said, and with another sweet smile, she left. Alok kept watching. In that moment, all fear, all worry faded. A person, a beautiful person, had noticed him. Even if just for a moment.

On the other hand, Rudra felt thirsty. He was going towards the water stall when he collided with a girl walking quickly. "Oh! Sorry!" they both said together. Rudra steadied the fallen girl—grabbing her elbow. When she stood up and faced him, Rudra's breath caught.

She wasn't model-beautiful. But her eyes... her eyes had an amazing sparkle. Deep, brown eyes that looked straight into Rudra's soul. They held an intelligence, a strength that set her apart. Her face had a few freckles, and her lips had a surprised, yet amused smile.

"I was in a real hurry," the girl said, adjusting her clothes. Her voice was

clear and confident.

"No problem," Rudra said, unable to look away from her eyes. "I'm Rudra."

"Myra," she replied. And then it happened—a second-long eye contact, but it was so deep that the surrounding noise, music, crowd all blurred. This wasn't just attraction. It was a recognition, like two different tunes suddenly merging into one harmony. Then Myra smiled, and got lost in the crowd. Rudra stood there, unable to shake off that image, that feeling. He returned to Mayank.

"What happened?" Mayank asked, seeing the expression on Rudra's face.

"I saw a girl..." Rudra said softly. Mayank smiled and started teasing him, but there was a new spark in Rudra's eyes, one that had lit up for the first time since that night.

Meanwhile, Brijesh was trying to talk on his phone. "Mom, can't hear... too much noise here... okay, I'll talk later." The network was very poor. Looking for a better signal, he unconsciously moved towards the back of the campus, towards that jungle from where they had gone to the lab that night. The dandiya music gradually faded, replaced by the rustle of the jungle and the sound of crickets.

The darkness was thick, only a faint glow from the campus lights visible in the distance. Near a large tree he got signal two or three times. He talked quickly to his mother on the phone.

When he turned after finishing the call, he realized he had forgotten the way. In panic, he took another wrong turn, into a dense group of trees. The air had grown cold. Just then he heard a sound.

From far away, almost dissolved in the air... the sound of someone screaming. "Brijesh... save me..."

This voice... sounded like Kabir. But distant, muffled, scared. And it held pain.

Brijesh's heart pounded. "Kabir? Boss? Where are you?" He ran in the direction of the voice, crushing leaves and twigs under his new shoes.

Running through the trees, he found himself on that same old, familiar path leading to the sealed lab. The broken, rusted "RESTRICTED ZONE" board appeared to him, a ghostly silhouette in the moonlight.

His breaths were fast. There was fear, but worry for Kabir overpowered it. "Boss! Answer me! Where are you?"

The same rusted gate of the lab... was open today. Just an inch gap. No sound came from inside, just a deep, terrible silence. Brijesh hesitated. Then he imagined Kabir's scream again. He pushed the gate. The screech of the rusted latch tore the night's quiet.

The darkness inside swallowed him. He turned on his phone's torch. The hall was the same—dirty, broken, filled with those same black, dried saliva stains. He stepped slowly, his torch beam trembling. "Kabir boss? This isn't funny... tell me where you are? If this is a joke I'll..."

Just then he heard a sound... not of dripping water. It was a... sliding sound. As if something heavy and wet was dragging on the damp floor. And the sound was coming from above.

Slowly, holding his breath, Brijesh looked up.

On the ceiling, between broken plaster, something was moving. A long, black, smooth thing, with joints. It was a gigantic limb, hanging from the ceiling and slowly, inch by inch descending, like a spider's leg. At its end were five long, pointed, bone-like things... like fingers, but their tips looked sharp as blades.

Brijesh's blood froze. His mouth hung open. He wanted to scream, but his voice got stuck in his throat, turning into a choked gurgle. He started backing away, his foot stepping on an overturned beaker which shattered with a crack.

Hearing the sound, that limb jerked! And from another part of the ceiling, near the wall, a second limb emerged. It was completely different—thin, bony, and at its end was a large, round, black, shiny thing... an eye.

That eye slowly rotated and fixed directly on Brijesh. It held no emotion. No hatred, no anger. Just a void, bottomless, ancient hunger. Looking into it was

like peering into a chasm with no end.

Brijesh tried to turn and run, his mind now burning with terror instead of frozen fear. But just then, the plaster on the wall right in front of him burst open. In a cloud of dust, a third limb came out—smaller, swift, and at its end a sharp, bone-like stinger, from which a thick, black liquid dripped.

A second of silence. Brijesh's torchlight fell on all three limbs, which now surrounded him from three sides.

Then the stinger-tipped limb shot forward.

A hiss-like sound cut through the air.

Brijesh's last, short scream—a mix of fear and shock—was absorbed into the lab's walls, lost in the faint dandiya music coming from afar.

That black, emotionless eye watched, unblinking, as his body collapsed and went completely still — paralyzed, but not dead.

Chapter 10: The Lost Melody

A thin, trembling line existed between the lab’s deadly silence and the loud music of the dandiya. On one side, Brijesh’s body was turning cold, his shiny jacket now just a grimy stain in the darkness. On the other, the campus grounds were awash in a tide of color, light, and laughter. The contrast was so extreme it was terrifying in itself.

Kabir glanced at his watch. More than half an hour had passed. Brijesh still hadn’t returned. A strange restlessness, smoldering in his chest, was now slowly igniting. He scanned the crowd. Brijesh’s face was nowhere to be seen.

“Saaho,” Kabir said to his other crony, an awkward urgency hidden in his voice, “where did Brijesh go?”

Saaho, fiddling with a glass of water, shrugged. “Don’t know, boss. His mom called. The network was bad, so he went outside somewhere to talk.”

“How long has it been?” Kabir asked, his brows furrowing.

“Almost forty minutes,” Saaho said, now looking a bit concerned. “But he said he’d be back soon.”

At that moment, a message alert chimed on Saaho’s phone. A sharp, mechanical 'ding'. Saaho pulled out his phone. A name flashed on the screen —"Brijesh".

“Look, a message came,” Saaho said, breathing a sigh of relief. He opened the message and read it aloud, “Boss, Mom suddenly fell sick. I have to rush home. Tell Kabir boss, I’m sorry. See you later.”

Kabir took the phone and read it himself. The words were straightforward. That typical Brijesh-like awkwardness. But something was wrong. Very wrong. “Why didn’t he call me directly?” Kabir questioned, a dark line of suspicion in his voice.

“Maybe there was a network problem, boss. He did say there was no signal,” Saaho said, now finding Kabir’s worry contagious.

Kabir tried calling Brijesh's number. First time—switched off. Second time—same. His fingers tightened around the phone. Brijesh never switched off his phone. Never. He was the kind of guy who checked social media every ten minutes. And if his mom was sick, he'd have come running to Kabir first, screaming, asking for the car. This all… felt fabricated. Like an excuse had been crafted. But by whom? And why?

A shiver ran down his spine. His gaze involuntarily rose toward that corner of the campus where the jungle began. The darkness was deep and quiet. Brijesh had gone there… looking for a signal.

"Boss? Is something wrong?" Saaho asked.

"No… nothing," Kabir said, handing the phone back. But a door had opened in his mind, and a cold gust of wind was blowing through it.

'''

At the other end of the grounds, the dandiya circle was gaining speed. The DJ had changed the tune—a medium-paced, romantic Gujarati song. Couples were pairing up. Rudra and Mayank stood apart, sticks in hand. Rudra's heart was beating oddly—half from the fear of that night, half from some other hope.

Just then, a figure moved toward him from the crowd. Myra. She wore a simple salwar-kameez, but the light on her face made her stand out. She stopped right in front of Rudra, a stick in one hand.

"I don't have a partner," she said, a slight hesitation in her voice, but directness in her eyes. "Would… you play dandiya with me?"

Before words could leave Rudra's mouth, his head nodded in a yes. A smile, which he didn't know could still appear on his face, played on his lips. "Sure," he said.

They joined the circle. The first steps were clumsy. Rudra's mind was still divided between that black eye and the precise timing of the sticks. But Myra's presence… it was like a warm spot. Her laugh, when Rudra hit the stick off-beat, sounded sweeter than the music.

“You’re in engineering, right?” Myra asked, clacking the sticks.

“Yes. Mechanical. You?”

“Computer Science. Third semester,” she said. Then added with a smile, “And yes, I’ve heard about you. Rudra from the gym. Famous.”

Rudra laughed, a real laugh that came from his throat. “Famous? Maybe just for lifting heavy bags.”

“Maybe for something else too,” Myra said, and immediately focused on her stick, as if the words had slipped out unintentionally. Rudra noticed a slight color rise to her cheeks. His own heart gave a powerful thud and then calmed.

They spun a few more rounds. The conversation grew easier—college, favorite songs, complaints about lumpy pizza. Myra was smart, sharp, and there was an understanding in her eyes that made Rudra feel she had seen a lot, understood a lot. When the music sped up, and their sticks clacked faster, Rudra focused all his attention on that moment. In this moment, there was just the music, the sparkle in Myra’s eyes, and the warm feel of her hands when their fingers occasionally brushed as the sticks met.

When the song ended, both were a little breathless, smiling. “That… was fun,” Rudra said.

“Yes,” Myra said, her breaths also fast. “Maybe again sometime.” And then, with another smile, she got lost in the crowd, but this time leaving a warmth on Rudra’s face that didn’t fade even in the cold night air.

'''

Mayank had been watching all this from nearby. He had played dandiya with a classmate girl himself, but his attention was always on analysis. He had noted the ‘data’ between Rudra and Myra—closeness, eye contact, body language. It was positive. But his eyes were also on Kabir, who had now separated from Saaho and was leaning against a pillar, checking his phone repeatedly. A puzzle was forming in Mayank’s mind: Brijesh missing + Kabir’s restlessness + Dean’s control = a new, dangerous variable.

Kabir pushed himself into the dandiya circle, almost with a sense of self-punishment. He spun in a pair with a girl, but his movements were mechanical. His fists were so tight on the stick that the bones of his hands showed white. Every time the sticks clacked, they made a sharp, aggressive sound, as if he wanted to crush something. His eyes kept wandering outside the grounds, toward the darkness. Brijesh's message was running on a loop in his mind. 'Mom's health… going home…' It didn't fit.

He picked up his phone again. Dialed Brijesh's mother's number. The phone rang… and kept ringing. No answer. Another shiver. If Brijesh had really gone home, his mother would have answered. Or at least Brijesh himself… but no. Everything was numb.

The dandiya went on all night, but for our four protagonists, its magic had evaporated. The memory of Myra was like a warm ember in Rudra's mind, but the air around him was still cold. Mayank was making notes. Kabir was once again standing in a dark corner. And Alok… Alok had seen Riya walk away, and had cherished that moment's happiness within himself, like a precious thing surviving in a terrible world.

'''

The next morning, the college was trying to look 'normal' again. The dandiya decorations were being taken down, broken flower bunches littered the ground. The same old, tired air had returned to the classroom.

Kabir went straight to Saaho. "Any message from Brijesh? Any call?"

Saaho shook his head. "No, boss. I tried too. Phone is switched off."

"Did you call his house?" Kabir asked, an edge in his voice.

"Yeah… his sister answered. Said Brijesh didn't come home last night at all. They thought he stayed back at the college function."

The words hit Kabir like a punch in the gut. 'Didn't come home at all.' That message… it was fake. Completely. He took out his phone, read that message again. Every word was now burning like poison. Who had sent it? Not Brijesh… then who? And why?

His breaths began to quicken. The fear of that night, which had been buried under the dandiya noise, was now returning like a giant shadow. His gaze involuntarily went toward Rudra, Mayank, and Alok. They were also looking at him. The same question was in their eyes—the same fear.

Just then, the classroom door opened and Dean Sharma entered. There was no smile on her face today. A deep, formal gravity. The class fell silent.

“Students,” she began, her voice flat and heavy. “I have some sad news to share. Our third-semester student, Brijesh Verma, has been missing since last night. His family has officially filed a missing report.”

A buzz spread through the class. Whispers began. “Missing?” “But he was at the dandiya yesterday!” “Maybe he went home…”

But our four boys were stunned. A sharp ringing had filled their ears. The Dean’s voice was growing muffled. Missing. Official report. The words hung in the air, like poisonous fruit.

The Dean continued, “The college administration is providing full assistance to the police. If anyone has any information, please inform the authorities immediately.”

And then, as if part of a pre-scripted play, the Dean swept her gaze over the four of them. It was a contact of just a second, but so intense that Rudra felt as if an ice needle had pierced his eye. That look held no surprise. No worry. There was just an… "inspection". As if she was monitoring their reaction.

Class resumed, but no one could study. Kabir’s mind was racing. Brijesh had gone toward the jungle. Looking for a signal. The same jungle that led to the lab. And now he was missing.

He glanced slowly toward Rudra. Rudra’s eyes met his. Without a word, a question floated in the air: 'Did he go there? Did he… find that thing?'

Mayank wrote in the corner of his notebook: "Brijesh -> Jungle -> Lab? -> Missing. Dean knew beforehand?" He drew a large question mark below.

Alok tried to shrink into his seat. Hearing Brijesh’s name had sent a jolt

through his body. The person who had threatened him yesterday… was missing. It was scary. But there was also a strange truth—all four of them knew where Brijesh might have gone. And perhaps… what might have happened. This knowledge was a terrible burden.

When class ended, the four of them automatically gathered at the same deserted corner of the lawn where Rudra and Mayank had stood the day before.

“So?” Kabir said, his voice rough. “He went there. I know it.”

“We all know,” Rudra said, voice steady. “The question is, what now? Do we tell the Dean? Tell the police he’s in a sealed lab where a monster lives?”

“They’ll put us in an asylum,” Mayank said immediately. “And the Dean… the Dean has already warned us not to speak to anyone. She knew about Brijesh going missing. Look at her eyes. She wasn’t surprised.”

“So she knows he’s in the lab,” Alok whispered, as if afraid of his own thoughts. “And she did nothing. She didn’t send the police there.”

A terrible silence fell. The weight of this truth was pressing on them all. The Dean wasn’t just lying; she was willing to leave a missing student, perhaps a dead student, in that same hell, just to keep her secret.

“We have to go there,” Rudra said suddenly.

“What?” Kabir said, eyes wide.

“We need to find out. Confirm it. And… if he… if Brijesh is there…” Rudra didn’t finish his sentence. They all knew what would come after ‘if’.

“This is madness,” Mayank said, but his voice held not protest, but fear.

“Yes,” Rudra said, clenching his fist. “But we have no choice. The Dean is controlling us. Brijesh is missing. And that ‘thing’… it’s still there. We’re not alone in this. We’re together. And we need to find out what’s going on there, or the next one will be one of us.”

As his words ended, a cold gust of wind passed between them, rustling the

leaves of the tree. Far away, at a window of the administrative block, a calm face stood watching them. The Dean. As their conversation ended, she moved away from the window, a thin, satisfied smile on her lips. The prey was moving toward the trap on its own. They just needed a little more push.

Chapter 11: What Was Seen, Is Gone

The air in the corner where the four of them stood had become poisonous. The sensation of the Dean's gaze peering from the window clung to them like an invisible spider's web. Rudra's proposal—to go back to the lab—was an absurd, dangerous fruit hanging in the air, which could neither be denied nor accepted.

"Tonight," Rudra repeated, his eyes resting on each of his companions' faces one by one. "We have to find out. Brijesh's phone... that message... it's the lab."

Mayank closed his notebook. "The logic isn't wrong. But it's like committing suicide. The Dean already warned us that if a fifth person gets involved, it would be worse than 2009. Brijesh might be that fifth person. And look what happened to him."

"So we just sit here?" Kabir's voice held an angry, futile pain. "He's my guy. Whatever he is. I can't leave him like that." For the first time, Kabir's tone held not arrogance, but a deep, helpless responsibility. This new Kabir, this transformation, was startling even to Rudra and Mayank.

Alok quietly gripped his bag tightly. "But... what if we find that... thing there? The one on the ceiling?"

A shiver ran through everyone's spines. 'That thing'—a word that brought back the memory of that inhuman eye, those long, jointed limbs, and the growl.

"We'll be careful," Rudra said, more to convince himself. "We'll just go, check, and come back immediately. If Brijesh is there, then... we'll do what we can."

It was a false hope, and they all knew it. But only by clinging to that lie could they escape that silence. A plan was made: meet at the old gate at 9 PM. Weapons? Only torches, and a sturdy flashlight-cum-stick Rudra kept for the gym. It was foolish, but there was nothing better.

'''

Rudra's head was heavy as he left the college. The sun was setting, and the lengthening shadows reminded him of those black stains in the lab. He headed straight for the bus stop, so lost in his thoughts that he didn't hear the footsteps nearby.

"Rudra?"

A sweet, familiar voice startled him. He turned. Myra was standing there, her bag full of books slung over her shoulder. There was a friendly smile on her face, but a deep worry shone in her eyes.

"Oh... hi, Myra," Rudra said, quickly controlling his expressions.

"Are you okay?" she asked, stepping closer. "In class today you seemed very... quiet. And your friends too. What happened?"

Rudra's heart pounded. 'She was watching. She noticed.' This was dangerous. "Nothing," he said quickly, trying to bring a false lightness to his voice. "Just... college assignment, project pressure. A bit tired."

Myra tilted her head. Her gaze was so sharp Rudra felt as if she were reading through all the layers of pretense over his soul. "It doesn't look like just tiredness," she said softly. "You look scared."

It was a direct hit. Rudra tried to keep smiling. "Scared? Me? No... just, you know, exams are nearing..."

"Rudra," Myra interrupted, her voice soft but firm. "Last night, at the dandiya... you were happy for a moment. Then your friend said something to you, and your face changed. As if all the light went away. And this morning's announcement... about Brijesh going missing. Do you know something?"

The air seemed to stop. A terrible conflict raged in Rudra's mind. Myra seemed honest. Her concern was genuine. But the Dean's warning—'don't tell a fifth person'—echoed in his ears. And yet... in this darkness of loneliness and fear, Myra's presence was like a lamp's flame. The temptation to tell her, to share the burden, was very strong.

"You're misunderstanding," Rudra finally said, averting his gaze. "It's just

tiredness. I have to go home early. See you." And without looking back, he walked quickly toward the bus. The sensation of Myra's gaze on his back felt like a knife stabbing him.

'"

Tonight's darkness felt particularly thick. At 9 PM, the back of the campus was desolate and eerie. Rudra, Mayank, and Kabir gathered near the gate. Alok arrived late, his breath quick, eyes wide with fear.

"Let's start," Rudra said, gripping his 'stick-torch' tightly. Once again, the same path, the same terrifying jungle trail. Tonight, the jungle wasn't completely quiet. Occasionally, the sound of a distant twig breaking, or a strange rustling, as if a large creature was sliding through the bushes. At every sound, their lights darted about frantically.

As they neared the lab's rusted boundary wall, Mayank's light fell on something on the ground. A shiny, blue cover. A mobile phone.

"This..." Kabir snatched it up. The screen was cracked, but the power was on. The wallpaper—a selfie of Brijesh and Kabir, both making silly faces. "This is Brijesh's." His voice grew hollow. "He was here."

This was concrete proof. No doubt remained. All eyes rose toward the huge, dark building, standing in the darkness like a monstrous skull. Its gate today wasn't open, but closed. However, the lock was broken, as if someone had forced their way in.

Just then, a sharp rustle came from the bushes behind. All turned with a start.

"Who's there?" Rudra called out, readying his stick.

No answer. Just another movement, the sound of fleeing footsteps.

"Wait!" Rudra shouted and, without thinking, ran after the sound. Mayank and Kabir's warning voices echoed in his ears, but his body was now controlled by a rush of adrenaline. He ran past the bushes, went behind a tree, and stopped in an open field. There, breathing heavily, her back to him, stood a woman.

"Myra?" Rudra's breath caught.

She slowly turned. There was fear on her face, but also resolve. "Rudra, I'm sorry. I followed you. Your behavior... I was worried."

A strange wave of anger, relief, and fear washed over Rudra. "What are you doing here? This place isn't safe! You need to go back now!"

"No," Myra said firmly, stepping toward him. "You lied to me. You're in some trouble. I won't let you go alone."

"You don't understand—" Rudra began.

"Then explain it to me!" Myra cut him off. "Whose phone is this? What is this closed building? Why are you guys here in the dark of night?"

Rudra looked around. Mayank and Kabir had now reached them, irritation and despair on their faces. Alok was there too, even more frightened seeing Myra.

"This is Brijesh's phone," Rudra finally said, giving in. "We think he's inside this lab. This lab... it's been sealed since 2009. An accident happened."

"Sealed? Then how could anyone go inside?" Myra asked, testing the logic.

"We went inside too," Kabir said in a raspy voice. "Last night. And we saw... something there. Something that wasn't human."

Myra's eyes widened. She looked at Rudra's face, which was grim. She looked at Mayank, who was nodding. She looked at Alok, who was trembling. This was no joke.

"You're insane," she whispered. "You're all insane."

"Maybe," Rudra said. "But you have to go, Myra. This place is dangerous. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Myra took a long, trembling breath. She looked at the lab, then at these four scared, yet determined faces. "If this is true... then you need help. I'm not going."

The time for debate was over. Every moment of delay was dangerous for Brijesh. Rudra gave a suicidal nod. "Fine. But you stay behind us. Obey everything."

The five of them stepped toward the gate with the broken lock. The door creaked open. The darkness inside seemed even deeper, more alive. The air held a sweetish, rotten smell, like flowers and flesh decaying together.

Their lights fell again on those black stains. Today, the stains looked fresh. Shiny, wet. They headed for the main lab. The door was ajar.

Entering inside, their breaths stopped.

In the middle of the lab, on the floor, lay Brijesh.

But he didn't look like Brijesh. His clothes were torn. Strange, purplish marks covered his body, seeming to pulse as if alive. His eyes were open, but the pupils were so dilated that the eyes looked completely black. The fingers of his hands were twisted oddly, as if they had gained extra joints. Most horrifying was his chest—there was a deep, uneven wound, as if someone had dug something out. And around his body, on the floor, was a sticky, black substance.

"God..." Myra covered her mouth with her hand, a choked scream stuck in her throat.

Kabir didn't scream. He just moved forward lifelessly, went to his friend's corpse, and knelt. He touched Brijesh's hand. Cold, pliant. A strange gurgle came from his throat, a stony sound of pain and remorse. "I didn't save you," he whispered. "I couldn't stop you."

Rudra felt nauseous. He focused his attention on other details of Brijesh's body—for safety, to escape the emotions. Then his gaze fell on the palm of Brijesh's open hand. There, in his own blood and that black substance, something was written. A number, or perhaps a date.

"2009"

And below it, an incomplete word: "An..."

"Look," Rudra said, his voice faltering. Mayank came closer to see. "It's the same year. And this word... 'An...' Maybe 'inside'? 'Darkness'?"

"The police," Myra said, her voice trembling but a practicality entering it. "We should call the police now."

Rudra took out his phone. No network. "No signal here. We have to go out."

"We can't leave him here," Kabir said in a hollow voice, still looking at Brijesh's body.

"We have no choice," Mayank reasoned. "We need to get help. And this writing... it's evidence."

They tried to convince Kabir. Finally, he stood up, took one last look at Brijesh's face, and nodded. The five of them quickly exited the lab, running back through the jungle path. This time, it wasn't fear, but a sharp, decisive urgency that fueled them.

Near the campus boundary, the signal returned. Rudra picked up the phone and dialed 100. As the connection went through, he spoke rapidly: "We've found a body. In the old Biotech Research Lab at Sikkim University. Brijesh Verma... yes, the missing student. The condition is very bad. Please come quickly."

After hanging up, they all stood by the roadside, waiting for the police. Myra was shaken, but she held Rudra's hand. Her warmth was the only comfort. Kabir had his eyes closed. Mayank wrote '2009' and 'An...' in his notebook, drawing deep circles around them. Alok was staring at the ground, perhaps trying to escape the memory of Brijesh's eyes.

About twenty minutes later, the sound of police sirens was heard from afar. Red-blue lights tore through the night's darkness. Two police cars and a forensic van stopped. An inspector got out, holding a notebook.

"Are you the ones who called?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Rudra said, stepping forward. "The body is inside the lab. We'll show you the way."

The police team, guided by the five of them, set off again on the jungle path. The strong torches of the police officers illuminated the way. They were talking, communicating on the radio. This was normal procedure, and this normality brought a little relief to Rudra's mind.

The lab gate was opened again. The inspector signaled his team to go inside. Forensic experts, with cameras and kits, entered the lab.

Rudra and the others waited outside, huddled together. It would all be over now. The truth would come out. The Dean's secret would be exposed.

A few minutes passed. No sound came from inside the lab. Then, the inspector came out. Confusion and irritation were on his face.

"What happened?" Rudra asked.

The inspector stared at them. "There's no body there."

The air seemed to freeze. "W... what?" Kabir stepped forward and said. "He was lying in the middle! There was black substance all around him! There was writing on his palm!"

"Look, boys," the inspector said, anger now in his voice. "There's nothing there except dust, old stuff, and some dirty stains. No body, no blood, no writing."

"This is impossible!" Myra exclaimed. "I saw it myself! His eyes... that wound..."

"Are you all on something?" another police officer asked, looking at them with suspicion.

Rudra pushed past the police and re-entered the lab. His torch illuminated the same spot. The floor was clean. Just normal dust. The black stains were there, but they looked old, dry. Brijesh's body, the blood, the writing... all were gone. As if nothing had happened.

He looked around. The ceiling was the same, but there was no moving shape on it. Everything was still, silent, and innocent.

The inspector came up behind him. "Enough. This joke has gone too far. Wasting our time, making us enter a sealed property... a case could be filed against you."

Rudra turned. His eyes met his companions'. Kabir's face was as white as a sheet. Mayank's eyes were wide with disbelief. Alok was trembling slightly. And Myra... her eyes held not fear, but a deep, terrible dread—the kind that arises when your own mind starts lying to you.

"But... we saw," Rudra could only say, his voice reduced to a whisper. "We all saw it."

"Saw nothing," the inspector said sternly. "Now you people get out of here. Next time you do something like this, you'll regret it."

The police cars left, sounding their sirens as if announcing their foolishness. And the five of them stood there, in front of that sealed lab, which now seemed an innocent, empty shell. An invisible, powerful wall had risen between them and the truth. Someone, or something, could erase evidence. Could dissolve the horrific event that had happened before their eyes into thin air.

And the most terrifying question was: if Brijesh's body was never there, then what did they see? And that writing... "2009... An..." What happened to it?

The night wind whistled like a moan. As if the lab building itself was laughing. Rudra gripped Myra's hand tightly. Now the five of them were bound by a new, even more frightening truth—a truth the world could not see.

Chapter 12 – The Burial of Truth

The darkness from in front of the lab had now seeped into their souls. The red-blue lights of the police cars and the sound of the sirens had faded to a distant murmur as they departed, but their goosebumps still stood. A heavy, suffocating silence had spread between the five of them. The air carried traces of that same sickly-sweet smell, which had now embedded itself into their clothes.

"How... how is this possible?" Myra whispered. Her voice was trembling, and her eyes searched Rudra's face for an answer that wasn't there. "We all saw it. We even touched it... it was cold..."

"Not magic," Mayank said, his voice flat and analytical, though his fingers were tracing circles on his own arms, leaving white marks. "Someone removed it. In those twenty minutes between us leaving and the police arriving. It was someone who knew we had called the police."

"The Dean," Kabir said in a grating voice. His eyes no longer held fear, but a burning anger. "He saw us. He knew. He must have called someone... that body... that evidence..." He didn't finish his sentence. Calling Brijesh's body 'evidence' was causing him even more pain.

Alok was just shivering, his gaze fixed on the lab's open door, which now looked like the dark, laughing maw of a witch. "But... that writing... he was trying to tell us something. Now that's gone too."

Rudra gripped Myra's hand tightly. Her touch was the only solid thing anchoring him in this sea of confusion. "We can't stay here," he said, a new firmness in his voice. "We have to split up. We need to think. Tomorrow... we'll meet tomorrow."

They left without another word, taking different paths back. Rudra didn't let go of Myra's hand. He walked her back to her hostel. They were silent the whole way, but their silence spoke—woven with threads of fear, distrust, and the first strands of an unbreakable bond.

Reaching the hostel gate, Myra turned to look. The yellow light of the streetlamp glinted in her tear-filled eyes. "Rudra... what we saw tonight, the

world will never understand it. We're trapped with this truth forever now, aren't we?"

Rudra held her shoulders lightly. "We're not alone, Myra. There are five of us. And what we saw is real, even if the world erases it." He leaned in slightly, looking into her eyes. "You were very brave today. Without you... I might have broken."

Myra managed a tremulous smile. "You were lying to me, but I followed you anyway. Maybe I'm the crazy one." She took a step forward, and without thinking, Rudra pulled her into his arms. That warmth, the heat of her breath, the permanence of that moment—it was all a living, pulsating resistance against the silence and chaos of the night.

"Don't be afraid," Rudra whispered near her ear. "We'll figure this out. For Brijesh... for ourselves."

Myra nodded and gently pulled away. "See you tomorrow. Be careful."

Rudra watched until she went inside. Then he slowly began walking home. All through the journey, only one image played in his mind—Brijesh's black, wide-open eyes, and that incomplete word written on his palm—'An...'. Did he mean to write 'Inside'? Or 'Darkness'? Or... 'Ankit'? Had he started writing someone's name?

'"

The next morning, the college atmosphere was eerily 'normal'. The remnants of the dandiya decorations had been cleared away. The sun had begun to burn the mist off Gangtok's valley, but that mist now seemed to sit on the faces of the students in the classrooms. Everyone was whispering, avoiding eye contact. Brijesh's name hung in the air like a ghost.

Rudra, Mayank, and Alok entered class at the usual time. Kabir was absent. His seat was empty, a deep, painful scream of a void.

Just before the lecture began, Dean Kavya Sharma entered the classroom. Her face wore a proper, mournful solemnity. The class fell silent immediately.

"Dear students," she began, her voice heavy and measured. "The police administration has given us a tragic updatet: Brijesh Verma’s body had been recovered and the death registered as a suicide — a version the administration wanted everyone to accept, though it would later prove to be a staged report covering his removal to the lab

A collective gasp echoed in the class. Rudra's pulse quickened. He looked at Mayank, whose eyebrows were furrowed.

"The police have recovered a suicide note from his personal belongings," the Dean continued, holding a paper. She read aloud, and every word lashed at Rudra like a whip:

""I can't fight anymore. The pressure of exams, the fear of failing... life has begun to feel meaningless to me. Sorry, Mom. Sorry, Kabir Brother, I turned out to be weak. - Brijesh""

"Officially, the case has been registered as a suicide," the Dean said, a hint of artificial sorrow in her voice. "The college administration expresses its deepest condolences to the family. Counseling services are available for all students."

Having said that, she left, but as she went, her gaze lingered for a second on that empty seat, and then on Rudra, Mayank, and Alok. That gaze held no grief. Only a cold, deep scrutiny.

As soon as the door closed, the class erupted.

"Suicide? Brijesh?" a boy shouted. "He was so carefree! He never cared about failing!"

"But there's a note..." a girl whispered.

"The note is fake!" a blazing, hoarse voice dominated everyone. Kabir was standing in the doorway, his eyes red, face taut with distorted anger and lack of sleep. He stepped right in front of the class. "Brijesh was never afraid of failing! He didn't even have any backlogs! He was planning parties for next semester! This... this is a conspiracy!"

The lecturer tried to intervene, but Kabir's presence was now a storm. "They killed him! And now they want to cover it up with this fake note! I... I..." His voice suddenly choked. The mountain of anger crumbled into a river of pain. He hid his face in his hands, and his shoulders shook violently.

The scene was so heart-wrenching and unexpected that the entire class was stunned. Kabir, who always seemed an unbreakable, aggressive lion, was now broken and crying. Rudra thought of getting up, but Mayank held his hand and shook his head in warning. This was Kabir's pain, and letting it show was the only tribute to it.

Kabir wiped his face, and without making eye contact with anyone, walked out of the classroom. The silence after he left was even heavier.

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The entire college seemed to breathe a strange, collective sigh of relief that day. 'Suicide' was a frightening, but familiar ghost. It was easier to understand, easier to handle than 'murder' or 'mysterious disappearance'. The whispers now centered on Brijesh's 'mental pressure' and 'exam stress'. The case was closed. The world was ready to move on.

But for our four protagonists, the world had become even narrower, even more hostile. In the afternoon, they gathered again on the same deserted lawn.

"This note is completely fake," Mayank said, opening his notebook. "I've seen Brijesh's handwriting up close. He made the letter 'M' in a completely different way from the top. That style isn't in this note. It's a copy, a bad copy."

"But the police have accepted it," Alok said, his voice almost a whisper. "And now the body has been found in the river... no other evidence is left."

"The thing with the body is the most terrifying," Rudra said, his fists clenched. "Last night it was in the lab. This morning, in the river. Meaning someone picked it up, took it away, and threw it in the river. All overnight. That requires planning, resources, and... ruthlessness."

"The Dean," Kabir repeated. He was calm now, but his calm was like dangerous, sharp ice. "She can't be alone. Someone else is behind her. Some bigger power."

"We have to go back to the lab," Mayank suggested. "Maybe in daylight we'll see something else. Some mark... something."

Rudra nodded. It was risky, but they had no choice. They felt themselves being gaslit—being forced to doubt their own eyes, their own memories. They needed concrete proof at any cost.

That same evening, just before sunset, the four of them were on the jungle path again. Even in daylight, the path seemed gloomy and frightening. The birdsong was sparse, the air still.

Reaching near the lab gate, they inspected every inch again. The broken lock was still there. Inside, the lab was exactly as the police had left it—dusty, deserted, and completely normal. No fresh, black stains. No writing. Where Brijesh had fallen, there were only marks in the dust.

"There's nothing here," Alok said despairingly. "As if... as if nothing happened."

"But it did happen," Kabir said, kneeling on the ground. He touched the spot with his fingers, like a devotee touching a temple floor. "I held his hand. It was cold. It was real."

Mayank took pictures of the surroundings with his phone, every corner, every crack. "Maybe the evidence is invisible to our eyes. In infrared? Or some chemical reaction... we need more advanced tools."

Rudra looked up at the ceiling. Nothing there either. No shifting shape, no black liquid. Was it all really a mass hallucination? No. Myra had seen it too. She wasn't part of their group. She had seen the same thing.

Filled with fatigue and frustration, they turned back. The evening mist was descending again, Gangtok's lights growing dimmer. Before parting, Rudra asked Kabir, "What will you do?"

Kabir looked straight into his eyes. His eyes no longer held tears, but an iron will. "I will find out the truth about that note. I will meet his family. I will find the people who turned my friend into just a 'case'. And I will show them that Kabir Singh Rawat never gives up."

He left without a goodbye, fueled by his pain and rage.

Rudra walked towards his home. On the way, his phone buzzed. A message from Myra: ""There's a sense of relief all over campus that the case is closed. I'm scared, Rudra. What are we fighting against?""

Rudra typed a reply, deleted it, then typed again: ""We're fighting the thing that wants to make us believe we're crazy. We're fighting the truth. And we're not alone. See you tomorrow.""

He put his phone away and looked towards the city. Below, the Teesta River flowed like a thin silver line—the same river that had swallowed the 'truth' that morning. But Rudra knew the truth was buried somewhere else. And he would dig it out, even if he had to descend into its grave himself.

Chapter 13 – The Truth in the Shadows

The silence that Kabir's outburst had left in the classroom hours ago still pressed down on their shoulders like a weight. The 'suicide note' read by the Dean had now spread through the air like a poisonous odor. The entire college was busy accepting that easy, buried truth—a student had committed suicide under pressure. Case closed.

But for our four, this wasn't an ending; it was a new, terrifying beginning.

In the afternoon, when the campus was drowned in a drowsy calm, the four of them met again on the same deserted lawn. The air was growing cold, and slate-grey clouds were gathering in the sky, as if the coming night would be especially dark.

"This note…" Mayank opened his notebook, where he had created a side-by-side comparison of Brijesh's real notes and a photo of the suicide note. "Look. Brijesh used to make a small loop at the top of the letter 'M'. It's not here. The bottom part of his 'R' was always curved. Here it's straight. It's a copy. A very sloppy copy."

"But the police accepted it," Alok said, hugging his arms tightly. "And now the body's been found… the evidence is complete."

"The evidence has been 'made' complete!" Kabir's anger boiled over again, but it was now a controlled, dangerous simmer. His eyes were red, but there were no tears—only a smoldering pain. "Brijesh was never afraid of failing! Backlogs? He didn't even know what backlogs were! He was planning which bike to buy next semester! This is a conspiracy… a clear conspiracy!"

His voice echoed in the quiet of the lawn for a few moments. Rudra placed a hand on his shoulder to calm him, but Kabir shrugged it off.

"Don't tell me to calm down, Rudra. I saw him. In the lab. His eyes… that wound…" Kabir's voice choked, but he controlled himself. "And now they say he jumped into the river? Why? Because life 'felt meaningless' to him? Absolutely not."

Mayank took out his phone. "One more thing. I checked Brijesh's social

media profile. Last post—a selfie from dandiya night, caption: ‘Nothing is greater than friends.’ Would a person who found life meaningless post something like that?”

“Maybe he was pretending,” Alok said in a frightened tone. “People are broken inside, they appear strong on the outside…”

“No, Alok,” Rudra said firmly. “Kabir is right. We all know what Brijesh was like. He wasn’t refined, but he was a fighter. For him, life was about parties, friends, and fun. This note… it’s the product of someone else’s mind. Someone who thinks they know what an ‘ideal’ suicide note looks like.”

A cold gust of wind passed between them, rustling the leaves. Mayank tightened his coat. “So the question is: if this is a conspiracy, who has the power to orchestrate something this big? Who can manipulate the police, the medical report, everything?”

The answer to that question was in everyone’s mind, but no one had the courage to say it. The Dean’s face, the administrative block, that invisible control… it all pointed to a web far larger than them.

“We have to go back to the lab,” Rudra said, deciding. “Not in daylight… in the evening. When the light is low. Maybe we’ll see something else. Some evidence that was hidden at night.”

It was risky, but they couldn’t run from risks now. Their own souls were questioning them. Had they really seen all that? Or had fear deceived their eyes? To free themselves from this doubt, they had to face that place again.

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It was 5 PM. The sun was about to hide behind the mountains, and long shadows were making the jungle path even more frightening. This time they decided to take separate routes—Rudra and Mayank together, Kabir alone, and Alok trailing behind, terrified but forcing himself.

The jungle path felt strangely alive today. Birds were chirping, there were sounds of insects. This normalcy itself felt abnormal. As if the jungle was deliberately wearing a mask.

Reaching the boundary wall of the lab, they gathered again and checked the door. The same broken lock. The same creaking door.

The atmosphere inside had changed. The slanting evening light was coming in through the windows, illuminating dust particles. Everything seemed still, quiet, and innocent. No black stains. No smell. Just the odor of old equipment and dust.

“There’s nothing here,” Alok whispered, his voice swinging between relief and disappointment. “As if… nothing happened.”

“But it did happen,” Kabir said, kneeling on the ground. He ran his palms over the spot where Brijesh had lain. “I touched him. It was real.”

Mayank took out his phone, turned on the flashlight, and began meticulously examining the walls and floor. “Blood stains can be removed. With bleach or some strong cleaner. But a small clue… a fiber, a mark…” His voice trailed off as his light paused on a corner of the wall. There, in the plaster, was a deep scratch mark, as if something sharp and hard had been dragged forcefully.

“Look at this,” Mayank said. Everyone gathered around him. The scratch looked fresh. The plaster around it was slightly chipped.

“Maybe a mark from some equipment,” Rudra said.

“Or a claw,” Alok said in a scared voice, and immediately fell silent.

Kabir studied the scratch pattern carefully. “It doesn’t look human. It’s… long. More than one sharp mark.”

A shiver ran through all of them. In their memories, those long, jointed limbs began to swim again, moving across the ceiling.

Then, a slow, grating sound came from behind them. The sound of a long, pained breath.

Everyone turned, startled. The door to the main hall was open into the darkness. Something moved inside. Behind a tall, broken shelf.

“Who’s there?” Rudra called out, raising his torch.

No answer. Just another rustle.

Kabir stepped forward, a wild determination on his face. “If someone’s there, show yourself. Hiding won’t help.”

They slowly moved towards the door. The hall was dark, and their torchlight could only penetrate a few feet. The sound came again—this time closer. A whisper, like words, but incomprehensible.

Alok grabbed Rudra’s coat, his body trembling. “Let’s get out of here… please, let’s go.”

But retreating was no longer possible. Curiosity and fear pushed them forward. Mayank turned on his phone camera, started recording—for evidence.

The torchlight illuminated the corner behind the shelf.

There, pressed against the wall, a figure was sitting.

It was a human… or had been. Its clothes were torn, its skin had strange, purple marks that seemed to flutter slightly. Its head was bowed, long tangled hair covering its face. Its hands… its hands were longer than normal, and the fingers were bent at odd angles.

“God…” It was the first time since Myra that Alok had spoken aloud.

The figure slowly raised its head. From behind the hair, two eyes gleamed—completely black, without pupils. Those eyes were looking at them, but not like a human’s—like something else, probing its prey, studying.

A rough, liquefied voice came from the figure’s mouth. “Go… don’t stay here… He is waking up.”

The voice was so broken and strange that it was hard to detect any human emotion in it. But the words were clear.

“Who are you?” Rudra asked, trying his best to keep his voice steady.

“The one who survived… and couldn’t die,” the figure said. It raised one hand, and they saw something moving beneath its skin, like worms crawling. “2009… it didn’t end. It went deeper. You people… you have been chosen. Your fear… your pain… it is His food.”

“Whose food?” Mayank asked, keeping the phone steady.

The figure tilted its head to one side, like a bird. “His… who lives in the dark. Who rewrites DNA into His own story. You saw Brijesh? He is His part now. His memories… his fear… all consumed by Him.”

Kabir stepped forward, a strange mix of aggression and compassion on his face. “Brijesh… did you see him? Do you know what happened to him?”

The figure made a strange, grating sound, perhaps a pained laugh. “I saw… when they took him. They took him below… where He lives. The body in the river? That was just a shadow… a lie. The real body… the real evidence… it’s still here. Below.”

“Below where?” Rudra asked quickly.

“The place from where He came… in that cave. Where the stone was dug up.” The figure pointed its hand down towards the floor. “Your Dean… she knows. But she is also afraid. She too is a puppet… of bigger players.”

Then, suddenly, the figure jerked its head up, as if it had heard something. Its black eyes widened. “He is coming… you must not see. Go! Now!”

“Who is coming?” Mayank asked.

But the figure didn’t answer. It pushed itself off the wall with its long hands and, with incredible speed, scuttled up towards the ceiling. Its movement was spider-like—unnatural, horrifying. It disappeared into a duct in the ceiling.

The four of them watched, holding their breath. That sickly-sweet smell had returned to the air.

Then, from a distance, came the sound of footsteps. Heavy, human footsteps. Someone was coming.

“Let’s go,” Rudra whispered. They ran towards the back, out through the same broken door. Running through the jungle path, their hearts pounded, minds clouded with confusion.

Stopping at a safe distance, Alok gasped, “What… what was that?”

“A survivor from 2009,” Mayank said, checking his phone. “He said… ‘the one who survived and couldn’t die.’”

“He said about Brijesh—‘He is His part now,’” Kabir repeated, a new, deeper anger in his eyes. “Meaning Brijesh didn’t die… he… he became part of that thing?”

“And he talked about a ‘cave,’” Rudra said, organizing his thoughts. “A stone that was dug up… and something below. The Dean knows, but she is also afraid.”

They fell silent, trying to process the weight of this new information. They were not only fighting a mysterious power, but an entity that turned humans into… something else. And now doubt was growing in their own minds. Was what they saw real? Or was that figure also a projection of their fear? Were their minds playing tricks on them?

Mayank opened his phone and played the video he had recorded. On the screen, in the torchlight, the figure was clearly visible, its inhuman eyes, its long limbs. But just as the figure moved towards the ceiling, heavy noise filled the video, and the image blurred. When it cleared, the screen showed only an empty corner. The figure was gone.

“This isn’t possible,” Mayank said in amazement. “I recorded continuously. It was there… and then it wasn’t.”

“Maybe even the camera can’t capture it,” Alok said fearfully. “Maybe it’s really… a ghost.”

“No,” Rudra said firmly, though his voice held doubt too. “It was real. We all saw it. We all heard it. But it said our fear… our pain… is His food. Meaning, the more we fear, the stronger He becomes.”

That thought was the most terrifying of all. Their own fear was their enemy. And how could they not be afraid? When the truth itself was so frightening?

In the last light of the evening, they walked back via separate paths. But they were not alone now. They carried with them new information, new questions, and a deep, suffocating doubt—could they trust their own eyes, their own minds? Or were they slowly becoming part of the very darkness they were running from?

Chapter 14 – Bonds and Light

It was the fourteenth night since Brijesh's disappearance. The fourteenth night that sleep was fleeing from Rudra's eyelids. He was looking out his window—the twinkling lights of Gangtok, growing dim in the fog, as if the world was closing its eyes. His fingers wandered aimlessly over his phone's keypad, stopping just short of Myra's name.

His mind was being pulled between two poles. On one side was that inhuman figure seen in the lab—its black eyes, its warning. On the other side was Myra—her warmth, her normalcy, which had now become the most precious thing to him. But did he have the right to drag that normalcy into his curse?

The phone's ringtone shattered his thoughts. Myra's face lit up the screen.

"Hello?"

"You're awake," Myra's voice held a mix of worry and relief. "I thought... maybe you'd be asleep."

"Sleep is difficult," Rudra said, tracing a circle on the windowpane with his breath.

"I'm at the park near your hostel. If... if you want to talk."

Rudra grabbed his jacket without wasting a moment.

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The night park was deserted, only the yellow light of a distant streetlamp encircling Myra. She sat on a bench, holding a thermos cup in both hands. As Rudra approached, she tried to smile, but her eyes held the same fear that had seeped into all of them.

"Hot chocolate," she said, handing him the cup. "From your voice, it sounded like you needed something warm."

Rudra took the cup, his fingers brushing against hers. For a moment, that touch became the only reality in his world. "You shouldn't have come here alone."

"And you shouldn't have gone back to that place alone," Myra replied, a gentle rebuke in her voice. "But neither of us listens, do we?"

Rudra sat down beside her. The steam rising from the warm cup created a hazy veil between them. "We saw something again today, Myra."

He told her everything—the figure, its warning, its mention of a "cave" and "stone." Myra listened quietly, her face growing solemn.

"This is all... this is no longer science, is it?" she finally said. "It sounds like something from a horror movie."

"But it's our reality," Rudra said, resting his head in his hands. "And I... I don't want to drag you into this any further, Myra."

Myra turned to look at him. The streetlamp light highlighted the soft contours of her face. "You're not 'dragging' me, Rudra. I came myself. Because..." She took a deep breath. "Because sitting here alone, trying to live a normal life without you, is more frightening. At least here, I'm with the truth. With you."

Rudra's heart beat with a powerful thud. He looked into Myra's eyes—there was fear, yes, but far more determination. A strength that was shoring up his own trembling resolve.

"But if something happens to you..." Rudra's voice choked. "Remember the day you asked me why I was so sad? I lied to you then. But today I'll tell you the truth... Myra, I'm afraid of you."

Myra's brows furrowed. "Of me? Why?"

"Because I've started to fall in love with you," the words spilled from Rudra's mouth without restraint, like a truth long held back. "And in this terrifying, dark world... loving someone is the most dangerous thing. To love means to make someone your weakness. And if you become my weakness... and they target you..." His voice broke completely.

Silence fell. Only the distant sound of a dog barking. Then Myra slowly reached out, touched Rudra's cheek. Her touch was so gentle that tears welled

in Rudra's eyes.

"I love you, Rudra," Myra whispered, each word clear and firm. "And love is not a weakness. Love... love is the strength that gives us the courage to fight this darkness. You want to protect me, and I want to protect you. Isn't that what love is?"

Rudra looked into her eyes, and all doubt vanished. He placed his hand behind her neck and leaned in slowly. Their breaths mingled, then their lips. The kiss was delicate, filled with fear and hope, like a vow. When they parted, there were tears in Myra's eyes, but they were tears of joy.

"We are together," Myra said, resting her forehead against his. "And we will uncover this truth. For Brijesh. For ourselves. For our love."

Rudra held her tightly, and in that moment, the darkness of the lab, that figure, the memory of Brijesh—everything faded. Only this warmth remained, this belief that they were not alone.

'''

That same night, another broken heart was wandering in search of solace.

Alok sat in his hostel room, but the four walls felt like they were closing in on him. Every shadow seemed to move, every sound seemed like that figure's whisper. He searched for Riya's number on his phone. He had never called her before. But today... today he needed someone who could understand that fear, someone who wasn't part of that class.

The phone rang and then stopped. "Hello?" Riya's voice was calm, a little surprised.

"Riya... it's me, Alok. I'm... sorry for calling at this hour..."

"It's okay, Alok. Are you alright?" There was genuine concern in her voice.

"No... I'm not alright at all. Can... can I meet you? Just... need to talk."

A moment of silence. "Yes. At the bench behind the library. In half an hour."

'"

Half an hour later, Alok sat facing Riya, twisting his fingers restlessly. Riya placed a warm cup of coffee in his hands. "Drink. Your hands are ice cold."

"Thank you," Alok whispered. He took a sip, and then it all poured out—the scene in the lab, the figure, its warning, and most of all, the terrible suspicion that maybe his own mind was deceiving him.

Riya listened peacefully, her eyes fixed on Alok's face. When he finished, she let out a long, trembling breath.

"You're not crazy, Alok," she finally said. "Your mind isn't deceiving you. Because... because I too am a part of that same darkness, just in a different way."

Alok looked at her in surprise. "What do you mean?"

Riya opened her bag and pulled out an old, tattered diary. '2009' was written on its cover. "This is my uncle's diary. He was also a student at this university. Biotech. And he disappeared in 2009."

Alok's breath caught. "Disappeared... in 2009?"

Riya flipped the pages of the diary and pulled out an old, yellowed letter. "This is his last letter, written to my mother. Read it."

Alok took the letter with trembling hands. The handwriting seemed rushed, some words faded.

""'Dear Sister,"

"It's hard to write about what I'm doing. Dr. Sharma's (you know her, the one who's Dean now) project... it's no longer just research. She has discovered something. She calls it 'Project Anomaly X.' It's a life form... but not alive. An energy? A parasite? It can read DNA... change it. It senses our fear, feeds on our pain."

"Last night, in the lab... something happened. A sample leaked. Those who came into contact with it... they changed. I saw it with my own eyes, Sister.

Humans... they were no longer human. They started crawling on walls, growling like animals. And their eyes... God, their eyes..."

"Dr. Sharma tried to cover everything up. But I think she herself is scared. There is someone above her... a greater power. They want to turn this 'Anomaly' into a weapon."

"If you receive this letter, and I don't return... know that I have probably become a part of it. A part of this 'Anomaly.' My fear... my memories... it will consume it all."

"Take care of Riya. Never let her come to this university."

"Your younger brother,"
"Anurag""

Alok looked at Riya after reading the letter. There were tears in her eyes, but they had dried, as if shed long ago.

"Your uncle..." Alok whispered.

"He never returned," Riya said, her voice flat, emotionless. "The police said he ran away. The college said it was an accident. But my mother knew. And I... I came here because I wanted to know the truth. I thought maybe I'd find a clue. And then... then all that happened with you guys."

Alok couldn't help himself. He took Riya's hand. "You're not alone, Riya. We... we are also victims of the same thing. And now we know its name —'Anomaly X.'"

Riya looked at him, and for the first time, a weak, pained smile appeared on her face. "You have a lot of courage, Alok. You're so scared... yet you're still fighting."

"I'm not fighting," Alok said, a new understanding in his voice. "We are fighting. Rudra, Mayank, Kabir... and now you. And this letter... it's our evidence. It tells us that maybe even the Dean isn't as guilty as we thought. She's scared too. There's someone above her."

Riya nodded. "My uncle wrote—'They want to turn this Anomaly into a weapon.' Meaning some organization... maybe a corporation. And Brijesh... maybe he saw something about their current experiments. That's why they silenced him."

A cold breeze enveloped them. Alok took off his jacket and placed it over Riya's shoulders. A spontaneous, simple gesture. Riya looked at him in surprise, then whispered a quiet "Thank you."

"We should show this letter to Rudra and the others," Alok said. "It could change everything."

"Yes," Riya said. "But be careful. If these people are powerful enough to turn a murder into a suicide... this letter could be dangerous for us."

They decided to meet everyone the next day. Alok walked Riya back to her hostel. At the door, Riya turned back. "Alok... you trusted me today. You know, in class, I always watched you. Your calmness... your sensitivity. The world sees it as weakness. But it is your strength. Your emotions could be the very weapon against that 'Anomaly.' Because it feeds on fear... and love is stronger than fear."

Alok's cheeks grew warm. He didn't say anything, just gave a grateful smile. As he walked back, his steps were lighter. The fear was still there, but he was no longer alone. He had a new clue, a new ally, and a new belief that their emotions—their fear, their love, their pain—were perhaps their greatest strength against that darkness.

Just as he entered his room, his phone buzzed. A message from Rudra: ""Tomorrow morning. Library. Important. And... Alok, are you okay?""

Alok typed back with a smile: ""Yes. We will all be okay.""

That night, for the first time, Alok slept without nightmares. His dreams held no black eyes, only words etched in the ink of an old letter—'"Project Anomaly X"'—and the hope that truth would, finally, come to light.

Chapter 15 – Digital Ghost

Mayank's eyes were immersed in the blue glow of the screen. The clock in his room struck two in the morning, but there was no trace of sleep. Three laptops were open on his desk—one with a coding interface, another with a map of the university's network, and the third with a series of screenshots of Brijesh's social media profiles.

For the past twenty-four hours, Mayank had been chasing a single question: "If Brijesh never jumped into the river, then where was his phone last?"

The letter from Riya's uncle had shown a new path—'Project Anomaly X.' But for Mayank, concrete data was more important than abstract mysteries. And the data was within his reach; he just had to crack it.

He tried method after method. University Wi-Fi logs—access denied. Cell tower location—he needed a friend who was interning at a telecom company. But that friend had flatly refused: "This is illegal, Mayank. And your friend's case is closed by the police."

But Mayank knew that data never truly dies. It hides somewhere. He traced Brijesh's phone's IMEI number—the unique identifier for every phone. Then he infiltrated some forums on the dark web, searching for tools that could track cell tower pings.

It was unethical. Perhaps illegal. But when the truth is being buried, what use are rules?

At one in the morning, a tool finally responded. A map opened, displaying Gangtok's cell tower network as a green-blue grid. He entered Brijesh's phone's IMEI number and set the timeline to the night of the dandiya—the night Brijesh disappeared.

The first few hours were normal. The phone was on campus, then around the dandiya grounds. Then, around eleven at night, the phone moved inexplicably toward the jungle. It was the same path that led to the lab. Mayank's heart began to race. This was what they already knew.

But then, exactly at midnight, something strange happened.

The phone's signal suddenly vanished. Completely. As if the phone had been switched off. Mayank zoomed in further on his screen. The phone's last location... was not the lab.

It was near the university's old administration block.

"This..." Mayank whispered to himself. His brows furrowed. He checked the timeline again. The phone went into the jungle, then its location changed abruptly—straight to the back of the admin block. This was physically impossible. The distance between the jungle and the admin block would take at least twenty minutes to cover on foot. But the timeline showed this change happening in just two minutes.

There were two possibilities: either the data was wrong, or Brijesh's phone was in a vehicle. But at midnight, in the jungle, what vehicle?

He looked at the data for the next day. The phone's signal never came back online. Not until the phone with the 'suicide note' was found by the police—on the banks of the Teesta River.

But the key issue here was: "Brijesh's phone was never near the river." Its last known location was the university's admin block.

Mayank leaned back and took a long breath. The afterimage of the screen light spun in his eyes. This information could change everything. But it was also uncovering a new, deeper mystery.

He picked up his phone. Typed a message in the group chat: ""Everyone at the library basement study room at 6 AM sharp. Very urgent. Tell no one.""

Then he went to the window. It was dark outside, but the silhouette of the tall administration block was visible in the moonlight. What was going on inside that building? And what did the Dean have to do with it?

'''

Six o'clock. The library's basement study room was deserted and cold. The air smelled of book dust and old furniture. Rudra, Kabir, and Alok arrived together, their faces marked by sleep and worry.

"What happened?" Rudra asked, getting straight to the point. "What did you find staying up all night?"

Mayank opened his laptop and turned the screen toward them. He explained his search—the IMEI number, cell tower pings, the timeline. And then he showed the crucial map where a red dot was frozen near the old admin block.

"This is the last location of Brijesh's phone," Mayank said, his voice flat but heavy. "Three and a half kilometers away from the Teesta River."

Kabir leaned forward to look at the screen, as if he didn't believe his eyes. "So... so he never even went to the river? Which means the body the police claimed to find there… was never Brijesh. It was staged."

"His phone didn't go," Mayank corrected. "And unless someone separated the phone from him, we have to assume Brijesh himself wasn't near the river either."

Alok found his throat dry. "But the police said the phone was found by the river..."

"The phone was found, but when and how is the question," Mayank said. "My data shows the phone was near the admin block at midnight. After that, its signal disappears. Then suddenly the next day, it's found by the river. Someone took it there."

"The Dean's office is in the admin block," Rudra said softly, as if a big truth was dawning. "That's where she came from when she gave us that file."

Kabir's face flushed with anger. "So she's the biggest liar! She killed Brijesh... and then threw his phone by the river to make it look like a suicide!"

"Calm down, Kabir," Rudra said, though his own voice trembled. "We need to think. According to the letter from Riya's uncle, the Dean is also scared. She might be working under a greater power."

"Then we need to look inside the admin block," Mayank said. "Find out what's going on there. Why did Brijesh's phone go there? Is there a lab there?

A secret project?"

Alok shivered. "Going there... that would be even more dangerous. The lab was different, but the admin block... people come and go there even during the day. If we're caught..."

"We won't get caught," Mayank said, a sharp glint in his eyes. "I've seen the blueprints. There's an old basement under the admin block that's no longer used. It has a door that opens outward, toward the jungle. Maybe Brijesh went in that way."

Rudra looked at everyone. There was fear, but more than that, there was resolve. "Tonight," he said. "We go there tonight. But this time, with a better plan. Mayank, you need the blueprints and camera locations. Kabir, you have strength, but we need to work stealthily, not violently. Alok... your eyes are sharp. You notice the smallest things."

"And me?" A voice came from the door.

Everyone turned, startled. Riya stood there, her uncle's diary in her hands. Her face held a remarkable determination.

"Riya! How did you..." Alok said in surprise.

"I saw your faces yesterday," Riya said, stepping in and closing the door. "I knew something big was happening. And I want to be part of it. My uncle paid for this secret with his life. I will be his voice."

Rudra looked at Riya. "This is dangerous, Riya."

"My life has been dangerous for the past ten years, Rudra," Riya said, a pained warmth in her voice. "Every night I wonder what happened to my uncle. Now I have a chance to know the truth. Let me be a part of it."

Mayank nodded. "Her diary is like a guidebook for us. Without it, we'll be groping in the dark."

Rudra finally agreed. "Alright. But we stay together. No one separates. And if anything feels wrong, we turn back immediately."

A plan was formed: at eleven at night, when the campus slept, they would meet at the basement door behind the admin block via the jungle path. Mayank would bring maps and hacking tools. Rudra and Kabir would handle security and strength. Alok and Riya would look for clues.

Before leaving, Riya pulled a page from the diary. "My uncle wrote here: 'Anomaly X doesn't just change DNA; it warps the energy of the space itself. Where it resides, the laws of time and space begin to break.' Maybe that's why Brijesh's phone seemed to jump from one place to another."

This thought was the most terrifying. They were not only fighting humans, but a power that could bend the laws of physics.

'"

Time crawled like a tortoise that day. Their bodies were in classes, but their minds wandered in the dark basement of the admin block. The Dean made eye contact with Rudra once in the corridor, and her gaze held something Rudra couldn't understand—perhaps worry, perhaps a warning, or perhaps a silent plea for help.

Night deepened. At eleven, the five of them were on the jungle path, better prepared this time. Mayank had a special torch with adjustable brightness. Rudra carried his club-torch. Kabir wore thick gloves. Alok held a small notebook and pen. And Riya clutched her uncle's diary to her chest.

The back wall of the admin block appeared. The building looked gloomy even during the day, but at night it seemed like a giant, sleeping monster. Mayank located the basement door according to the blueprints—a heavy iron door, secured with a rusty chain and padlock.

"The lock is new," Kabir whispered. "No rust."

Mayank took a small toolkit from his bag. "I can pick it. But it'll make noise."

"The sound will get lost in the jungle," Rudra said. "Hurry."

Mayank inserted a needle-like tool into the lock, and after a few seconds of trying, a sharp 'click' sounded. The lock opened. The chain was removed. The

door creaked open, releasing a gust of cold, stale air from inside.

The darkness inside was thick as tar. The torchlight revealed a narrow, brick staircase leading down.

"This basement was built in the 1950s," Mayank explained. "Probably used as a storage room when this building was constructed."

They descended the stairs one by one. The air smelled of dampness and mold. At the bottom of the stairs was a long corridor with old wooden doors on either side, numbered—B1, B2...

"This looks just like the lab," Alok whispered.

Riya opened the diary. "My uncle wrote that there was a 'secure facility' for the project, separate from the main lab. Maybe this is the place."

They moved down the corridor. Some doors were open, revealing empty, dusty rooms. But the last door at the end—B7—was different. It was made of metal and had a modern electronic lock.

"Here," Rudra said. "Something's here."

Mayank examined the lock. "This is a high-security lock. Hacking it will take time."

"Then we don't have time," Kabir said. He looked at the edge of the door. "This metal is old. Maybe it's weakened."

"It'll make noise," Rudra warned.

"But knowing what's inside is more important," Kabir said. He tightened his gloves and wedged his fingers into the seam where the metal met the wall. His muscles tensed. For a moment, nothing happened; then, with a sharp, screeching sound, the metal edge bent. The door came slightly out of its frame.

The gap was enough. Rudra and Kabir pulled the door together, and it opened halfway.

The air inside was icy cold and fresh, as if air conditioning was running. The scene revealed by the torchlight made everyone gasp.

This was no old storage room. It was a modern, compact lab. Stainless steel tables, computer screens, shelves filled with various chemicals. But the most terrifying thing was a large, glass cage in the center. And inside that cage...

...was something.

It was human, but not entirely. Its skin had those same purple marks. Its limbs were long, and it was curled up in a corner. When the torchlight fell on it, it raised its head.

Its eyes were not black. They were human. Terrified, pained, but human.

And that face... they all recognized it.

It looked like Rohit Singh. The same person they had met in the lab. But a red recording light blinked on the glass — this was an old observation recording, not a live scene..

Rohit raised his hand, his fingers trembling. His lips moved, and a pained but clear voice emerged:

"You... you finally came. They kept me here... for observation. And for you... as a warning."

And then, he uttered the words that sent ice down their spines:

"Run... because one of you is staying here tonight."

Chapter 16 – A One-Sided Conversation

Rohit Singh’s final warning—"One of you is staying here tonight"—poured ice water into the veins of all five of them. The artificially cold air of that room now seemed to freeze their very blood.

"We have to get out of here," Mayank whispered, his eyes fixed on the pathetic creature trapped in the cage. "Now."

But they couldn't move. Rohit's eyes—still human, even if his body had become something else—were pulling them in. They held a deep pain, a warning, and somewhere, a buried plea for help.

"You need our help?" Rudra asked softly.

Rohit nodded, a slow, painful movement. "For me... there is no hope. But you... you can still escape. They are looking for you. Sensors... motion sensors..."

As his words ended, a small red light blinked on in a corner of the room. A camera.

"Run!" Kabir shouted, and that command jerked them all out of their stupor.

They turned and fled back the way they came, down the narrow passage. From behind came the sound of a metal door opening—another door they hadn't seen. Heavy footsteps. Not security guards... these steps sounded too heavy, too precise.

They raced up the stairs, out through the broken basement door, and into the jungle. The leaves seemed to scream, every branch eager to stop them. They didn't stop until the campus lights were visible and their lungs were burning.

"Is... is everyone here?" Alok gasped, doubling over.

"Yes," Rudra said, his gaze fixed on the darkness behind. No one was following. Or perhaps they were, but hiding. "But Rohit... he said 'one of you.'"

"He was trying to scare us," Mayank said, gripping his laptop bag tightly.

"Or... or he was telling the truth."

Riya still held her uncle's diary close to her chest. "My uncle wrote... Anomaly X targets not just the body, but the mind. It knows our fear. Maybe it's trying to use our fear to separate us."

"We won't separate," Rudra said firmly. "We stay together."

But a splinter of doubt was lodged in his mind. What Rohit said wasn't just a warning. It was a prophecy. And Rudra knew that if something was going to happen to one of them, it would be him. He couldn't risk losing Myra. He needed more information. And that information was likely with the Dean.

'"

That night, Rudra couldn't sleep. The image of Rohit's cage and the terror in his eyes kept replaying. And then Myra's face—her smile, her warmth, which was now like oxygen to him. If something happened to her... if he lost her...

At two in the morning, he made a decision.

He got up quietly, put on his black hoodie and dark jeans. He picked up his club-torch and a small Swiss Army knife he'd never used. He knew this was madness. But madness was his new normal now.

He headed toward the admin block, alone this time. He didn't take the same route. He used the main campus paths, hiding in shadows, exploiting camera blind spots. He knew the main door of the admin block was locked at night, but at the back, on the second floor, a window was always loose—he'd seen maintenance workers fixing it once.

Reaching the back of the block, he used a pipe to climb to the window. It was loose. He opened it and slipped inside. He was in a dark janitor's closet, among buckets and mops.

His heart was pounding. Every sound startled him. He slowly opened the door and stepped into the corridor. The Dean's office was on the third floor. He went up the stairs, pausing to listen at every step.

On the third floor, the corridor was dimly lit. The door to the Dean's office was closed, but light peeked out from under it. She was still inside.

Rudra wondered what to do. Breaking the door wasn't an option. Maybe he could sneak into another room, look for files, for clues. He turned away, but then he heard a voice.

The Dean's voice. She was on the phone. And the voice... was coming from an air vent in the corridor wall.

Rudra crouched and pressed his ear to the vent. The voice was clear.

"...Yes, I understand. But the situation is getting out of control. They reached the basement. Rohit saw them."

A moment of silence. The Dean was listening.

"I know the risk. But do you remember what happened in 2009? We can't repeat that mistake. These boys... one of them in particular... his fear is much deeper than the others'. It could act like a magnet."

Rudra's breath caught. She was talking about Alok.

Then the Dean's voice softened, with a tenderness Rudra had never heard before. She was speaking lovingly to someone.

"Myra, 'dear', don't panic."

Hearing that name, Rudra's blood froze. A sharp ringing filled his ears.

"Yes, I know how hard you're working," the Dean was saying. "But this is necessary. Maintain their trust. Make them believe we are on their side... especially Rudra. He trusts you. He... loves you. And that is our greatest strength."

Rudra's entire body went numb. Sweat beaded on his palms. He leaned against the wall, his ear still to the vent.

"No, 'dear', you must not get exposed now. You just stay close to them. Report their every activity. If they try something again... especially if Rudra

thinks of doing something alone... tell me immediately."

Myra's voice wasn't audible, but the Dean's responses said everything.

"Yes, I know it's difficult. You feel... a connection to him. But remember, Myra, this is for our family's safety. For your father's legacy. If the Chancellor finds out we are interfering with his project... something like 2009 will happen, but worse."

The Chancellor. So there was someone above the Dean. Riya's uncle was right.

"You just play your role, 'beti'. Show affection, but maintain distance. Don't get emotionally carried away. This will all end one day, and we will all be safe. Until then... you be our eyes and ears. Okay? Trust me."

Another moment of silence. Then the Dean said softly, "Goodnight, 'beti'. Be careful. I love you."

The call ended.

Rudra stood there, his world shattering around him. Every word, every inflection was a knife twisting inside him.

'Myra. dear.' The Dean's daughter.

'Maintain their trust.'

'He trusts you. He loves you. And that is our greatest strength.'

'Don't get emotionally carried away.'

Rudra's mind began replaying their moments—their first meeting, her holding his hand at dandiya, their kiss in the park that night... Was it all an act? An assignment? Was every smile, every worried glance, every "I love you" from Myra a lie?

A terrible pain rose in his chest, as if someone were tearing it open and ripping out his heart. He covered his mouth with his hand to stifle any sound. Tears flowed in hot, sharp streams, but he didn't cry out. He just trembled, a

deep, internal quaking that shook him to his bones.

He thought he knew what fear was—the darkness of the lab, that figure, Brijesh's body. But this... this was fear on a different level. This was betrayal. This was the hijacking of his own emotions. He had bared himself completely to Myra—his weaknesses, his fear, his love... and all of it was a reporting tool. Intelligence for the Dean.

Just then, he heard the sound of the Dean's office door latch opening.

Rudra looked up, startled. The door opened, and the Dean stepped out. She looked tired, deep lines of worry etched on her face. With her back to Rudra, she walked down the corridor in the other direction, perhaps toward the restroom.

This was Rudra's chance. He could slip into her room, search for files. But his body didn't respond. He was numb. His willpower, his courage... all of it had been swallowed by that phone call.

He slowly backed away, toward the stairs. His steps were unsteady. He descended, climbed out the same window, and dropped to the ground. The ground was cold, but his body was on fire—with shame, with anger, with an abyss of sorrow.

He walked across the campus, directionless. He could go anywhere. His phone vibrated. A message.

From Myra.

""Rudra, are you sleeping? I'm missing you. See you tomorrow? I baked something for you. ❤""

He looked at the screen, and the message now seemed a poisonous joke. He wanted to laugh, a bitter, broken laugh. But only a choked gasp escaped his throat.

He didn't reply. He started walking toward his hostel, but he didn't want to go there. He couldn't go to that room where memories of Myra clung to everything—the hoodie she had worn, the book they had read together.

He found himself at the park behind the library, where they had first confessed their love. He sat on the same bench where Myra had given him hot chocolate.

Clouds covered the sky, the moon and stars hidden. Just like his world, all its light suddenly extinguished.

What would he do? Tell Kabir, Mayank, Alok? Tell them that Myra is a traitor? That their every plan, their every move, was reaching the Dean?

But was Myra really a traitor? The Dean had said—"This is for our family's safety." Was Myra scared too? Was she doing all this under duress?

But then those words... "Don't get emotionally carried away."

That meant Myra knew she 'could' get carried away. Which meant there was 'some' truth to her feelings. Or... or had she just gotten so deep into her role that she'd become confused herself?

Rudra's head began to throb. Every thought inflicted a new wound.

He looked at his phone again. Myra had sent a photo—a muffin with a heart drawn on it. ""Practice for you.""

Before, this photo would have filled him with warmth. Now, it felt like a deception. A performance. A performance in which he was the lead actor, without a script, without knowing every line was written against him.

He put the phone back in his pocket. The tears had stopped. They were replaced by an emptiness, a void that swallowed all the color, all the sound, all the emotion inside him.

He stood up and began walking toward his hostel. His steps were heavy, as if his feet had been filled with lead.

Entering his room, his eyes fell on the hoodie Myra had worn. He picked it up, wanting to tear it, to throw it away. But he didn't. He just looked at it, as if it were a strange, malevolent object.

He placed his phone on the desk and lay down on the bed. He stared at the

ceiling. There was nothing there. Just white plaster. Like his life—now empty, colorless, and false.

He closed his eyes. But sleep didn't come. Only one sound echoed in his ears—the Dean's voice, that poisonous affection, that treacherous tenderness.

“Myra, dear, maintain their trust. Let them keep feeling that we are on their side…”

And then Myra's face, which now seemed like a mask. A beautiful, captivating, deadly mask.

Rudra clenched his fists so hard his nails dug into his palms. The pain gave him a little relief. This pain was real. It wasn't a lie.

He knew that tomorrow morning, he would have to tell his friends everything. He would have to confront Myra. And the very thought of that confrontation broke his soul all over again.

How would he look into her eyes? How would he say that the love he felt was a lie?

The night passed slowly, but for Rudra, time had stopped. He was trapped in that moment—by the air vent, listening to the Dean's voice, watching his world fall apart.

And the worst part was that he still, somewhere deep down, loved Myra. And that love was now his punishment.

Chapter 17 – Storm of Pain

The first ray of morning light peeked through Rudra's window, but instead of entering his eyes, it shattered and scattered, as if no light could dwell in his soul anymore. He lay on the same bed, in the same position all night—eyes open, staring at the ceiling. His body felt like a heavy, lifeless object.

His phone had rung several times. Calls from Myra. One after another. Each vibration left a painful echo on the bed. He finally rejected the last call and typed a message—to the group of the other four:

""Library basement now. Very urgent. Do not tell Myra.""

'"

An hour later, the four of them were in the same study room. The air was thick with the terrifying memories of last night and a new, dreadful calm that had settled on Rudra's face.

"What happened?" Kabir asked directly. "You went last night, didn't you? To the admin block?"

Rudra nodded. Before his voice could emerge, he took a long, trembling breath. And then he began to tell them everything—the air vent, the Dean's conversation, and the poisonous truth he had heard.

With every word, the room's temperature seemed to drop. Mayank's face became stone-like, expressionless. Alok's breathing quickened. Riya clenched her fists. And Kabir... Kabir's face first showed disbelief, then anger, and then a deep, futile compassion.

"No..." Alok whispered. "Myra... she's not like that."

"I heard it myself, Alok," Rudra's voice was completely flat, as if no life remained in it. "She said—'Maintain their trust. He trusts you. He loves you. That is our greatest strength.'"

Riya buried her face in her hands. "But these last few days... she was with us. She helped us. She took risks."

"Maybe it was all an act," Kabir said bitterly. "We were fools. Her mother chose us, and she sent her daughter to trap us."

"No," Rudra said suddenly, a flicker of emotion—sharp, bitter pain—appearing in his voice for the first time. "She wasn't sent. She was already there. Among us. She was the one who initiated the friendship with me. I remember... that day she asked me why I was sad. Maybe from that moment... maybe it was all planned from then."

Just then, the study room door opened.

Myra stood there.

In her hands was a small tiffin box, and on her face was a concerned, affectionate smile. "You're all here? I called Rudra, but... Rudra, are you okay?" She took a step forward. "I brought you those muffins. You didn't last night..."

She stopped. Because she felt the atmosphere in the room. The frozen ice on all their faces as they looked at her. The emptiness in Rudra's eyes, which was now turning into a burning coal.

"What... what happened?" A slight tremble entered Myra's voice.

Rudra slowly stood up. His body seemed to break with every step. He stopped in front of Myra and looked into her eyes. The same eyes in which he had once seen his everything. Now they looked like a stranger's eyes.

"You..." Rudra's voice was a whisper that echoed in the room's silence. "You... are the Dean's daughter?"

The words hung in the air. The color drained from Myra's face. Her hand went slack, and the tiffin box fell to the floor and opened. The muffin with the heart drawn on it rolled in the dust.

"Yes..." Myra said, her voice faltering. "But listen—"

"Was it all planned?" Rudra's voice rose now, carrying a painful sharpness. "Your coming to me? Meeting me? Showing affection? All a lie? Your job

was to monitor us? We trusted you... I trusted you... and you betrayed me."

Tears filled Myra's eyes. "No, Rudra, don't think that! My mother's intention was only to help you! She knows the truth of 2009! She wants you to uncover the lab's secret, but safely! I didn't lie to you, I just didn't tell the whole truth..."

"The whole truth?" Rudra let out a bitter laugh that died in his throat. "Isn't it the whole truth that you're her daughter? That you were sent to keep an eye on us? That you had to report our every move, every plan? Isn't it the whole truth that you made a mockery of my love... my love?"

The last sentence came out like a scream. Rudra's eyes were now red, tears pooled in them but wouldn't fall.

"I didn't mock your love!" Myra shouted, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Yes, my mother asked me to stay close to you. Yes, I had to tell her about your activities. But what happened between us... that was real, Rudra! Every word, every touch, every kiss... it was real for me! I love you!"

"Liar!" Rudra's voice cracked. "Your mother said—'Don't get emotionally carried away.' Remember? I heard it! You just had to play a role. And you played it so well that maybe you got confused yourself. But I'm not. Not anymore."

Myra was trembling; she held onto a chair arm to steady herself. "You're misunderstanding... Mom is scared. The Chancellor and his people... they are dangerous. Mom wants you to expose the truth, but she wants you to be safe. I was there for your safety!"

"And the corpse we saw in the lab, how did it disappear?" Rudra stepped forward, his eyes now burning coals. "How did it reach the river? That note? Did your mother kill Brijesh?"

"No!" Myra covered her mouth with her hands, a pained scream escaping. "Mom could never do that! Something else is going on... there's another power manipulating all of us... Anomaly X... it's not just a life form, it can enter our minds... maybe everything we're seeing is..."

"Stop making excuses!" Rudra cut her off. His voice held only disgust and brokenness now. "You made a mockery of my love. You learned my weaknesses, my fear, my trust... and you handed them over to your mother. Do you know what I told you? That I love you so I want to keep you away? You turned that love into a weapon. A tool."

He took another step. Only a foot remained between them. "Every 'I love you' from you was a lie. Every touch was a lie. And the biggest lie..." his voice dropped to a whisper again, "the biggest lie was that I believed it was true."

Myra raised her hand, perhaps to touch him, perhaps to explain. "Rudra, I promise you..."

"Don't touch me!" Rudra brushed her hand away. His voice held so much venom that Myra recoiled. "Even your touch feels like a lie to me now. Your every glance is deceit. You are deceit."

This was the final blow. A wave of shock, pain, and a deep, hopeless anger washed over Myra's face. The tears in her eyes dried, replaced by a gleam—the gleam of a hurt, humiliated creature.

"So you think it was all a lie?" Myra's voice was now clear and hard. "You think my tears were fake? My worry was fake? When I stayed up all night baking these muffins for you, was that a lie? When I cried thinking about your fear, was that a lie?"

She took a step forward. "You've become so self-centered that you can't see I'm trapped in this web too! My mother told me to help you guys, but not to tell you who I am. Because if the Chancellor finds out Mom is helping you, we'll all be in danger! And yes... yes, I had to keep an eye on you. But not because I wanted to betray you, but because I wanted to save you!"

"Save?" Rudra mocked. "You reported our every plan to them. Because of you, maybe Brijesh was..."

"I didn't cause Brijesh's death, you did!" Myra screamed.

Silence.

Deep, crack-inducing silence.

Rudra's face turned white. "W...what?"

Myra put her hand over her mouth, as if the words had escaped unintentionally. Her eyes filled again. "I mean... I don't mean you killed him. But you were the one who urged him to go to the lab that night. You're the one who always takes the lead, who pushes everyone into danger. If you had stopped Brijesh... if you hadn't let him go..."

She didn't finish. A sharp, ringing sound echoed in the room.

Rudra touched his cheek, where Myra had slapped him hard.

That slap wasn't just a hit. It was the explosion of all suppressed pain, all misunderstandings, all broken trust.

"You have no right to accuse me like that," Myra whispered, her voice trembling. "You have no right to call my love a lie. Do you know how much I love you? So much that I lied to my mother, didn't tell her your full plan. I wanted to protect you. And you... you call me a traitor?"

Rudra rubbed his cheek. The pain of the slap wasn't on his face, but burning in his soul. He looked into Myra's eyes—there was no love there now. Only a deep, bleeding pain, perhaps no less than his own.

But it was too late now. Words had been spoken. Wounds had been inflicted.

"We're over," Rudra said, his voice now completely flat, lifeless. "You and I. This is all... over."

He turned and walked towards the door. His steps were unsteady, but he didn't stop.

"Rudra!" Myra called out, a final, broken scream.

But Rudra didn't look back. He walked into the corridor and disappeared from sight.

Silence fell in the room. Myra stood there, trembling, drowning in tears. Then

her legs gave way, and she sat on the floor, burying her face in her hands and sobbing. Her shoulders shook violently, and with every sob, her heart shattered further.

Riya was the first to move. She slowly went to Myra and hugged her. Myra didn't resist. She just rested her head on Riya's shoulder and kept crying.

Kabir, Mayank, and Alok looked at each other. Their eyes held shock, sorrow, and a helpless anger. They knew they had to take care of Rudra. But first, they had to get Myra out of there safely.

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Rudra left the library and walked straight toward the jungle. He didn't know where he was going. He just had to keep walking. Tears were now streaming from his eyes—calm, continuous streams soaking his cheeks.

He went and sat under a tree, put his head on his knees, and cried openly. This wasn't a sob-filled cry. It was a deep, resonant wail that shook his entire body. With every tear, a memory of Myra washed away—her laughter, the sparkle in her eyes, the warmth of her hand, that kiss in the park, that muffin, that "I love you"...

And with every memory, the Dean's voice also echoed—'Maintain their trust... don't get emotionally carried away.'

Was it all really a lie? Were Myra's tears real? Was her pain real? But then that slap... that accusation... saying he had a hand in Brijesh's death...

The sound of Rudra's crying was lost in the silence of the jungle. The leaves of the trees rustled, as if nature was joining in his pain.

Then, he heard footsteps behind him. He turned. Kabir, Mayank, and Alok were standing there. Their faces held concern and deep empathy.

Kabir sat down beside him without a word. He put a hand on Rudra's shoulder. No words. Just presence.

Mayank took out a handkerchief and offered it to Rudra. Alok sat down in

front of him and just watched, tears in his own eyes too.

Rudra took the handkerchief and wiped his face. His sobs slowly began to quiet.

"She..." Rudra said haltingly, "she said Brijesh's death happened because of me."

"She said it in anger," Kabir said softly. "People say a lot in anger."

"But maybe she spoke the truth," Rudra said, his voice choking again. "I was the one who urged him to go to the lab. I'm the one dragging all of you into this danger."

"We entered this danger ourselves, Rudra," Mayank said. "No one is dragging anyone. We are a team."

"And Myra?" Alok asked quietly.

Rudra closed his eyes. "I can never forgive her. And maybe she can never forgive me either."

"Riya is with her," Kabir informed. "She took her safely to her hostel."

Rudra nodded. There was a strange relief that Myra wasn't alone. But then he stopped himself. He shouldn't worry about her anymore. She was no longer his.

"What now?" Alok asked.

Rudra took a deep breath and opened his eyes. There were no tears now. Only a cold, hard determination.

"Now we are alone," he said. "No Dean, no Myra. Just the four of us. And we have to fight this battle ourselves now. For Brijesh. For ourselves."

He stood up and brushed off his clothes. "We need to find out who the Chancellor is. What Anomaly X is. And how we stop it."

Kabir also stood up and put a hand on his shoulder. "You're not alone,

brother. We're with you. Always."

Rudra looked into his eyes. For the first time that day, a weak, broken smile appeared on his face—it wasn't a smile, it was a vow.

Slowly, he stood up. His voice wasn't trembling now; it was firm —"Enough... enough drama now. Now we will uncover the secret of this Anomaly X. And Kabir, I promise you... Brijesh will get justice."

Hearing this, Kabir couldn't hold back. He stepped forward and hugged Rudra. It was the first time—the bickering between them transformed into true friendship at that moment.

Alok and Mayank also stepped forward. "Boss, we're with you," both said together.

Rudra looked around, his eyes no longer held fatigue, but a new spark. "Now we are all a team... and in this team, everyone will have equal freedom."

The four of them walked back from the jungle toward the campus. Behind, under that tree, lay the ground soaked with Rudra's tears and the broken pieces of the muffin—silent witnesses to a broken love.

And far away, from a hostel window, Myra was looking out, her eyes swollen, her heart broken. She watched the four of them leave and realized she had not only lost Rudra, but her place in that whole team, that hope that was now moving away from her.

She closed the window and shrunk into the darkness. Outside, the clouds were clearing, but inside two hearts, the storm had not yet subsided.

Chapter 18: Broken, Yet Unconquered

In the dense shadow of the jungle where Rudra's heart had shattered, a new resolve was now taking root. Kabir's hand was on his shoulder—not just a support, but a pledge. Mayank's silence was turning into strategy. Alok's moist eyes had become a strength of sensitivity. And the four of them were a unit, broken yet connected.

"We can't stay here," Rudra said, bringing a new, gritty firmness to his voice. "We need a safe place. Somewhere no one can find us."

Mayank nodded thoughtfully. "My uncle has an old warehouse on the outskirts of the city. No electricity, but it's perfect for hiding. No one goes there."

"Then let's go," Kabir said. "But we need to call Riya too. She has that diary."

Rudra hesitated for a moment. Riya was with Myra. But Mayank explained, "Riya has always helped us. And her perspective is different. She's not Myra."

Rudra nodded. This was no time for emotional decisions.

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By afternoon, the five of them had gathered in the old, dusty warehouse. The place was truly deserted—broken windows, rusted machinery, and the smell of wood and rust in the air. Riya lit a lantern, whose flame cast eerie shadows on their faces.

"This diary," Riya said, placing it in the middle of the makeshift table. "Belongs to my uncle, Anurag Sharma. It has everything about Project Anomaly X from 2009."

Rudra opened the diary. The pages had yellowed, the handwriting sometimes faded. But the words were still alive. He began to read aloud.

"“Entry 15: Today Dr. Kavya Sharma (now Dean) told us this project is no

longer just research. An external corporate organization is funding it. Their goal: to develop ‘Anomaly X’ as a bio-weapon. This life form can not only alter DNA but also read and control emotional frequency. Fear is its primary fuel.”"

“Fear…” Alok whispered, hugging his arms tightly. “So that’s why we were chosen. Our fear.”

“Our fear, our trauma,” Mayank said, taking notes in his notebook. “It makes sense. Rudra—blames himself for Brijesh’s death. Kabir—guilt over not being able to save his friend. Alok—afraid even of normal life. Riya—the pain of her uncle’s disappearance. And I… I fear losing control.”

This admission was new to everyone. Mayank had never spoken about his fear before.

“And Brijesh?” Kabir asked, his voice heavy. “What was his fear?”

Riya turned the diary forward. “My uncle wrote here: ‘Anomaly X affects those the most whose fear is hidden, who run from themselves. Those who pretend to be fearless—the fear inside them is the most toxic.’”

Kabir’s face filled with bitterness. “Brijesh… he always seemed carefree. But his father… he was afraid of him. Afraid of failing. Maybe that’s why…”

“That’s why he became its easy prey,” Rudra finished. He turned to the next page of the diary.

"“Entry 22: Today I overheard the Chancellor’s conversation by mistake. He was talking to a corporate representative. They were talking about a ‘field test.’ On a small, controlled group. I heard names… of some students. One of them is my own sister’s son… my nephew. They are targeting him too. I have to do something.”"

“Nephew…” Riya said, her eyes widening. “My cousin… he was also in this university. He too disappeared in 2009.”

The pieces of the puzzle were coming together. The Chancellor and a secret corporate organization. The Dean, perhaps under their pressure. And

Anomaly X—a life form that fed on fear and could turn humans into monsters.

“We have to define our roles,” Rudra said, closing the diary. “We can’t trust anyone now. Not the Dean, not Myra, not the police. We are on our own. Rogue.”

“Rogue?” Alok asked.

“Independent,” Mayank explained. “Uncontrolled. We’ll make our own rules.”

Rudra looked at everyone. “I’ll be the leader. Not because I want to, but because I am ready to take responsibility. I’ll make mistakes, but I’ll take responsibility for every mistake.”

“And I’ll be the strategist,” Mayank said. “Data, tech, planning—that will be my responsibility.”

Kabir clenched his fists. “I’ll be the strength. But not just physical… I’ll be the moral compass. We will never become like those we are fighting. We won’t harm the innocent.”

Everyone’s gaze turned to Alok. He shrank back. “I… what can I do?”

Riya looked at him with a gentle smile. “Your sensitivity is your strength, Alok. You can sense the smallest clues. You can read emotions. You be our emotional anchor. You’ll ensure we remain human.”

Alok looked at her in surprise. For the first time in his life, his ‘weakness’ was being called a strength.

“And me?” Riya asked.

“You are the historian and the connector,” Rudra said. “You have the knowledge of the past. You can connect the links we can’t see.”

The team was formed. A broken, yet unconquered team.

“Now our first target,” Rudra said. “We need to find out who the Chancellor

is, and where his secret lab is. Mayank?”

Mayank opened his laptop, which was running on a portable power bank. “I hacked the university’s financial records. In the last ten years, a company called ‘Nexus Biotech’ has made heavy funding. Their representative meets the Chancellor regularly. And here’s the most interesting thing—Nexus Biotech has no headquarters. It’s a shell company, owned by a larger corporate group, ‘Valhalla Industries.’”

“Valhalla?” Kabir asked. “That name…”

“In Norse mythology, Valhalla is where warriors go after death,” Riya said. “But in a modern context, it could be a very large, secret military-industrial group.”

“So this isn’t just limited to the university,” Rudra said. “This is a national, perhaps international-level conspiracy.”

“And five students are against it,” Alok said in a frightened voice.

“Five students who know the truth,” Rudra corrected. “And who have nothing left to lose.”

His tone was harsh. Having broken with Myra, he had buried his emotions in a way. He would now work like a machine.

“Next step,” Mayank said. “We need to locate that secret lab. According to my data, there’s an old bunker under the university, built during the Cold War. Its entrance is from the basement of the admin block—probably the same place where we saw Rohit.”

“But there’s security there,” Alok said.

“We’ll go at night,” Rudra said. “But this time, better prepared. Mayank, can you hack the security system?”

“I can try. But I need physical access. A USB port.”

“I’ll get that for you,” Kabir said. “Even if I have to break the door.”

“No,” Rudra stopped him. “We’ll work stealthily. Violence will be the last option.”

Just then, Alok made a strange move. He suddenly got up and walked to a corner of the warehouse where old boxes were stacked. He touched one box and flinched as if shocked.

“Here…” he whispered. “Something is here… a lot of sorrow. A lot of fear.”

Everyone went to him. Alok moved the box. On the wall behind it was a mark—a raised pattern. As if someone had pushed the plaster from inside.

“What is this?” Riya asked.

Alok placed his hand on the wall and closed his eyes. “It’s… the silhouette of a woman. She is scared. She’s hiding from someone. She was here… many years ago. She saw something. Something that drove her mad.”

His voice had a supernatural resonance. Alok’s sensitivity was transforming into a mysterious power.

“Can you feel anything else?” Rudra asked softly.

Alok nodded, his eyes still closed. “She was a scientist… she made a mistake… she left something… a clue… below…”

He suddenly jerked back, as if pushed. His breathing was rapid. “Sorry… it was too intense.”

Mayank examined the wall closely. He noticed a part of the plaster was loose. He removed it. Underneath was a small metal tube, rusted. He opened it. Inside was an old, crumpled paper.

Riya carefully unfolded it. It was a hand-drawn map of the university campus layout. A large ‘X’ mark was at one place—the old bunker. And written on it: ""“Entry from here. Only at 2:17 AM. During the moon’s second phase.”"

“2:17?” Kabir said. “What is this, some magic?”

“Maybe a tidal lock or some safety mechanism,” Mayank said. “That opens

only at a specific time.”

“And who was this woman?” Alok asked, still trembling.

Riya looked at the back of the map. There was a name—"“Dr. Alisha Menon. 2009.”"

“Alisha Menon…” Riya repeated softly. “I’ve heard this name. She was my uncle’s senior. She too disappeared.”

“So she hid this map,” Rudra said. “She knew someone would come one day.”

This was no coincidence. It was destiny. This warehouse, this map, Alok’s sensitivity… everything was part of a larger pattern.

“We now have a way,” Rudra said, carefully folding the map. “Tonight, at 2:17 AM, we enter that bunker.”

“But today is the moon’s second phase,” Mayank said, checking his phone. “The next opportunity will be next month.”

“So tonight is our only chance,” Kabir said. “We’re not ready.”

“We’ll never be fully ready,” Rudra said. “But we can’t miss this opportunity.”

They planned. At 1 AM, they would reach the campus. Mayank would disable the security system. Kabir and Rudra would distract the guards if needed. Alok and Riya would locate the entrance. And exactly at 2:17 AM, they would go in.

“If we get caught…” Alok said.

“Then we get caught,” Rudra said. “But we’ll try. For Brijesh. For all those who disappeared.”

Evening was setting in. The darkness inside the warehouse was deepening. The lantern’s flame made their faces mysterious.

Riya looked at Alok, who was still trembling. “Are you okay?”

Alok tried to smile. “No. But maybe I don’t need to be okay. Maybe it’s right to be afraid. Because he who is not afraid is a fool.”

This was a big achievement for Alok—to accept his fear, to embrace it.

Kabir took something out of his bag—five small walkie-talkie sets. “I got these. Range is limited, but they should work underground. We’ll stay in contact.”

Mayank gave each one a small pen drive. “This has the campus map and a distress signal program. If something goes wrong, plug it into any computer. It’ll send an encrypted message.”

Rudra looked at everyone. His eyes still held that emptiness, but beneath it, a new spark was burning—the spark of resolve.

“We are a team,” he said. “We depend on each other. No one will be a hero. No one will be a martyr. We all leave together, or we get stuck together.”

They placed their hands in the center—Rudra, Mayank, Kabir, Alok, Riya. Five hands, five broken hearts, five incomplete stories, now becoming one.

“For Brijesh,” Kabir said.

“For Uncle Anurag,” Riya said.

“For Dr. Alisha Menon,” Alok said.

“For the truth,” Mayank said.

Rudra closed his eyes for a second. Myra’s face floated in his mind—her smile, her tears, that slap. He pushed that image away.

“For us,” he said, opening his eyes. “Because if we don’t fight, no one else will.”

Night was falling upon them. Outside the warehouse, the moon’s second phase shone in the sky—a thin, sharp crescent, like a mysterious smile. This

night was their night of trial. Or perhaps, their night of liberation.

And far away, in the university campus, Dean Kavya Sharma was looking out from a window. In her hand was a photo of Myra, now soaked with tears. She had betrayed her daughter. She had betrayed these children. But she had no choice. The Chancellor's eyes were everywhere.

She took out an old file—'Project Anomaly X: Phase 2'. It had five names on it. Rudra, Mayank, Kabir, Alok, Riya. And a note: ""Potential Hosts. Test Subjects. Termination Order: Active.""

The Dean closed her eyes. "Forgive me, children," she whispered. "I tried to save you. But now… now you must fight on your own."

The moonlight glinted on a final tear on her face, then it faded.

Chapter 19: The Timeless Labyrinth

It was 2:17 AM. That moment, inscribed on Dr. Alisha Menon's map like a mysterious command, was now coming true. Behind the administrative building, in front of the same broken basement door, the five of them stood—their breaths forming mist in the air, filled with nervous energy.

Rudra checked his watch. "Exactly 2:17. Now."

Mayank pulled a cable from his laptop and connected it to an old, rusted metal panel on the wall. "There's a mechanical lock here. Hydraulic. Probably built for earthquake or flood protection."

"Can you open it?" Kabir asked, his eyes darting around for any unexpected danger.

"I'll try," Mayank said, his fingers flying over the keyboard. "But it needs power. Have to create a short circuit..."

He connected two wires. A spark flew, and a deep, grinding sound echoed from within the wall—as if a giant beast was waking from centuries of slumber. A section of the wall, which looked like stone, began sliding inward, revealing a narrow, dark opening.

A strange smell came with the dust—old paper, chemicals, and something sweetly rotten. It stung their nostrils like an ancient memory.

"Lights on," Rudra said, stepping forward.

They entered one by one. The stairs were iron, rusted, creaking with every step. Descending, they faced a long, damp corridor, water dripping from the ceiling. Old pipes lined the walls, some leaking.

"This looks like 1960s construction," Riya said, her fingers touching the wall. "A Cold War-era bunker. But this..."

She stopped. At the end of the corridor was a door, but it wasn't an ordinary metal door. It bore a large mark—an 'X' surrounded by a DNA helix. And below it was written: "Project Anomaly X. Entry Forbidden."

"We're here," Alok whispered, his voice trembling.

The door was closed, but not locked. Kabir pushed. The door creaked open.

And the sight inside stopped all their hearts.

This was no dark, scary bunker. It was a laboratory—perfectly preserved, as if time had stopped here.

Microscopes lay on tables, slides still placed underneath. On a desk was a coffee mug, half-drunk, now a dried black layer. Chairs were pushed back as if someone had suddenly gotten up and fled. Equations and diagrams were drawn on a whiteboard, some words faded.

"This... this is the 2009 lab," Riya said in amazement. "As if it were yesterday."

Mayank pointed to a computer whose screen was still on—only a red 'X' glowed. "Uninterrupted power supply. Probably connected to a generator."

Rudra picked up papers on a table. "These are data sheets... Subject numbers 1 to 12. Heart rate, brain waves, DNA samples..." He flipped a page. "But it says here... 'Subject 5: Mutation initiated. Purple marks on skin. Tendency to climb walls.'"

"Climb walls?" Kabir said. "Like we saw in the lab."

Alok was looking in another direction. In a corner of the lab, on the wall, were colored chalk drawings—a sun, flowers, a small house. Children's drawings.

"Were there... children here?" Alok asked, a strange tremble in his voice.

Riya saw a small table near the wall with toys on it—a teddy bear, some blocks. "This wasn't just a lab. It was also a daycare. For the researchers' children."

Alok involuntarily moved toward the wall, touching the drawing of the sun with its yellow rays.

And then, it happened.

A jolt, like an electric shock, but without pain. A flood—of images, sounds, emotions.

'Laughter. Giggles. The patter of small feet. "Sister, look at my drawing!" A girl's voice, about eight years old. "I drew a sun that will always shine!"'

'A gentle woman's voice: "Very beautiful, Preeti. Come, let's have snacks now."'

'Then... a sharp whistle. A red light. Fear. "Children, calmly! Calmly come back!" Shouting. Crying.'

'And then... a different kind of silence. A heavy, terrifying silence. As if something died in the air itself.'

Alok jerked his hand back as if burned. He started panting, his eyes wide.

"Alok? What happened?" Rudra asked, coming near.

"Children..." Alok whispered, tears welling in his eyes. "There were children here... they were happy... and then... then something happened. They saw something. Something that changed them."

Riya held his hand. "How do you know?"

"I saw... felt," Alok said, shaking his head. "As if I was there. Their memories... are embedded in the wall."

Kabir clenched his fist. "They experimented on children? These people are monsters."

Mayank opened a locker with 'Dr. Meera Sharma' written on it. He took out a journal. He flipped the pages and began reading aloud:

""Entry: 15 June 2009. Today we finally understood the nature of Anomaly X. It is not external—it is of this Earth. It came with the meteorite that fell in these mountains thousands of years ago. It does not spread infection... it accelerates evolution. Terraforming. Adapts life to its surrounding

environment. But it uses fear as fuel. Our fear... makes it more powerful.""

"Terraforming?" Rudra said. "Meaning it was transforming humans... into something else?"

Mayank read further: ""Subject 7 completely transformed today. His skin has developed a chitinous layer. He can easily climb walls. But he still cries... calls for his mother. That is the most painful part—he still feels human emotions, but his body is no longer human. We have created a monster. And the worst part... I think it's contagious. Emotionally. Fear is spreading like a virus.""

Silence fell in the lab. Only the drip-drip of water could be heard.

"So this is what happened in 2009," Riya said, her voice heavy. "They released something that went out of control. And the children... perhaps they were the first victims because their fear was the purest, the most intense."

Alok was looking at that drawing again. "Preeti... that girl's name was Preeti. She... where is she now?"

Just then, Mayank's eye fell on another file, stuck in a crack in the desk. He pulled it out. It was a photo—a group photo of lab staff. Everyone was smiling. In the center was a woman—Dr. Meera Sharma, resembling the Dean, but with a bright enthusiasm in her eyes. Next to her stood a young woman—about eighteen years old. And in that young woman's arms was a little girl—Preeti.

On the back was written: ""Meera, Myra (my niece), and Preeti… (our youngest subject). One day before the project began. Hope this will change the world.""

"Myra..." Rudra whispered. The photo slipped from his hand and fell to the floor.

So Myra wasn't just the Dean's daughter. She was also Dr. Meera Sharma's niece, present in the lab that day. And she was in this lab, at that time, when it all happened. She saw the children change. Perhaps she herself experienced something.

"She knew," Kabir said, anger in his voice. "She knew all this beforehand. And she didn't tell us."

"Maybe she was scared," Riya said. "Maybe she's a victim too."

Rudra picked up the photo and looked at Myra's young face—the same sparkle in her eyes that still appeared sometimes. But now that sparkle seemed like a painful secret.

Mayank pointed to the computer. "There might be more files. Let me try hacking it."

He sat at the computer and started running his tools. A list of files appeared on the screen. One file was named: ""Operation Phoenix - Human Evolution via Anomaly X.""

He opened it.

And what they saw froze their blood.

There were photos—Chancellor Devraj Thakur, a sixty-year-old man with a stern face, shaking hands with corporate representatives. Video logs: the Chancellor's voice, cold and calculated—""Subjects are healing rapidly, strength increasing, mental sensitivity... but there is instability. We need pure hosts. Emotionally strong, yet traumatized. Their fear will become the source of their power.""

And then, a list. Their list.

Potential Hosts:
1. Rudra Singh Chauhan: High pain tolerance, leadership qualities. Mentally strong.
2. Mayank Singh: Analytical precision. Fear of losing control.
3. Kabir Rawat: Aggression control. Guilt complex (brother's death).
4. Alok Pandey: Empathetic sensitivity. Social anxiety, trauma of neglect.
5. Riya Menon: Historical memory. Pain of missing family member.
6. Myra Sharma: (REDACTED)

"REDACTED?" Kabir said. "Why?"

"Maybe because she's theirs," Rudra said, his voice numb. "Or perhaps because experiments were already done on her."

Alok suddenly looked up. "Someone is watching us."

"What?" Rudra said.

"I felt it... a gaze. From above." Alok pointed towards the ceiling.

There were ventilation grilles in the ceiling. In one of them... something moved. A shadow.

"Someone's there!" Riya shouted.

The ceiling grille suddenly opened, and a figure jumped down—the same figure they had met in the lab. Rohit Singh. But now he was even more changed. His body had crystal-like protrusions, and his eyes held a strange, calm glow.

"You came back," Rohit said, his voice less raspy now, more clear. "I thought you would. She said you would too."

"Who?" Rudra asked, readying his club.

"Meera," Rohit said. He looked at Dr. Meera Sharma's photo, and his eyes held an indescribable pain. "She is still here. She sent me. To warn you."

"What warning?" Mayank asked.

Rohit looked at all of them, and his gaze settled on Alok. "One of you... one of you will transform tonight. Anomaly X smells your fear. And your fear... it's in the air here. You're breathing it."

He pointed to the ceiling, from where a faint, glowing mist was descending—a mist that wasn't visible before.

"Gas..." Rudra said. "It's leaked again!"

"No," Rohit said. "It's been released deliberately. For you. For your test."

And then, from a distance, came the sound of a sharp whistle—the same sound Alok had heard in his vision. An emergency alarm.

The sound of doors closing. Thick, metal shutters were coming down.

"Get out!" Kabir shouted.

They ran towards the door. Rudra pushed Alok ahead. But the shutter was coming down fast. Kabir tried to hold it, but it was too heavy.

Mayank and Riya got out. Rudra pushed Alok out.

But before he could get out himself, the shutter came down. Rudra was trapped inside.

"Rudra!" Alok shouted from the other side.

Rudra looked back. Rohit was standing there, and the mist had now enveloped the entire lab. It floated in the air—glowing, filled with microscopic particles.

"Stop this!" Rudra said to Rohit.

"I can't stop it," Rohit said. "It's his will. The Chancellor's. He wants to see which of you is the strongest. Who... evolves."

Rudra covered his mouth with his shirt, but the mist was burning his skin. He struck the door, but it didn't budge.

And then, he heard a sound—a child crying. Preeti's.

He turned. In the mist, a small figure stood—with purple marks, but its eyes were still human. It was reaching out.

"Save me," it whispered.

And then, stones began falling from the ceiling. A large boulder came crashing down towards Rudra.

In the last moment, he pushed Alok, who was still near the door, to save him.

The boulder fell on Rudra. Darkness descended.

Chapter 20: Face Unmasked

Darkness. Pain. Difficulty breathing.

Rudra’s eyes opened. There was a sharp pain in his head, and a metallic taste in his mouth. He was in the mist—the same glowing, microscopic particles floating in the air. He looked at himself: he was lying on the ground, and the large boulder… hadn’t fallen on him directly, but beside him. Perhaps at the last moment, he had pulled himself aside.

“Alok?” he called out, his voice raspy and pained.

No answer.

He sat up, dizzy. The mist was thinning, perhaps the ventilation system was working. He looked around. Rohit was gone. The lab was still the same, just covered in this layer of mist.

Then he heard a sound—from the door. Someone was pushing. A voice: “Rudra! Are you in there?”

It was Kabir’s voice.

“Yes… I’m okay,” Rudra replied, standing up.

From under the metal shutter, a jack handle appeared. Someone had placed it from outside. The shutter lifted slightly, and Kabir’s face appeared. “Come out, quick!”

Rudra crawled out. Outside stood Mayank, Riya, and Alok. Alok was shaken but safe.

“You saved me,” Rudra said to Alok.

“You saved me first,” Alok whispered.

Mayank opened his laptop. “I hacked the shutter mechanism. But we don’t have much time. This whole area is covered with sensors. They must know we’re here.”

“Then we have to hurry,” Riya said. “There might be more files on that computer.”

They went back into the lab, cautiously this time. The mist was clearing now. Mayank went straight to the terminal whose screen still glowed with a red ‘X’.

“This is a standalone system,” he said, running his tools. “Disconnected from the network. Probably why it was left untouched.”

A password prompt appeared on the screen. Mayank ran a brute-force program. In seconds, the password cracked. A list of files appeared.

“Operation Phoenix,” Mayank read. “Human Evolution via Anomaly X.”

He opened the file.

The first picture stunned them all.

A meeting room. At the head of the table sat a man—around sixty, white hair, an arrogant, cold smile on his face. He was wearing an army uniform, but without any rank. Chancellor Devraj Thakur.

“That’s him,” Kabir said, sparks of anger in his eyes. “The one who killed Brijesh.”

In the next photo, the Chancellor was shaking hands with people in corporate attire. One face was familiar—the CEO of Nexus Biotech.

“Valhalla Industries,” Riya whispered. “This really is a global conspiracy.”

Mayank played a video file. The Chancellor’s voice echoed, cold and calculated, like a machine:

"“Date: 15 August 2023. Subjects showing accelerated healing, increased strength, mental sensitivity. But instability remains an issue. Control over emotional triggers is necessary. We need pure hosts. Emotionally strong, yet traumatized. Their fear will become the source of their power. That is the correct equation.”"

“He’s talking about us,” Alok said, his voice trembling.

Mayank opened the next file. An Excel sheet. And on it, their names.

"Potential Hosts - Selected:"
1. Rudra Singh Chauhan: High pain tolerance, leadership qualities. Mentally Strong. Potential Power: Physical strength/endurance.
2. Mayank Singh: Analytical precision. Fear of losing control (childhood accident where younger sister was injured). Potential Power: Enhanced intellectual capability/computation.
3. Kabir Rawat: Aggression control. Guilt complex (younger brother’s death by drowning, couldn’t save him). Potential Power: Extreme pain tolerance/adrenaline control.
4. Alok Pandey: Empathetic sensitivity. Social anxiety, trauma of neglect (parents’ divorce, neglect from both). Potential Power: Emotional perception/visions.
5. Riya Menon: Historical memory. Pain of missing family member (uncle’s disappearance). Potential Power: Memory retention/connecting links.
6. Myra Sharma: (REDACTED)

“Why REDACTED?” Kabir asked, his fists clenched. “Has she already been experimented on?”

“Perhaps,” Rudra said, his voice numb. “Or maybe she’s working for them.”

“No,” Riya said, opening another file. “Look, there’s a note here. ‘Subject S-1: Myra Sharma. Present in 2009. Minimal exposure. No mutation, but increased sensitivity. Use: Observation. To aid mother (Dr. Kavya Sharma).’”

“So she was being used to keep an eye on us,” Kabir said. “She’s a victim too.”

Rudra said nothing. Myra’s face was swirling in his mind—her smile, her tears. Was it all really an act? Or was she also trapped in this web?

“There’s more here,” Mayank said, scrolling. “Cryo-pods. They’ve preserved the 2009 victims. For study.”

“Where?” Rudra asked sharply.

Mayank opened a map. Behind the lab was a door that led to a long corridor. “This way.”

They moved cautiously. The corridor was cold, and there was a strange chemical smell in the air. At the end was a heavy door labeled ‘Cryogenic Preservation.’

The door was unlocked.

Kabir opened it.

The sight inside was nothing short of hell.

The room was large, with one after another, glass boxes—cryo-pods. Inside each was a figure. Some half-human, half-reptile. Some with bark-like skin. Some whose hands had turned into claws. They were all still, frozen, but their eyes… some of their eyes were open, and in them was a terrible, frozen agony.

“God…” Riya covered her mouth.

Alok went near a pod. Inside was a young man, no older than twenty. He had extra fingers on his hands, and spikes had grown on his back. Alok unintentionally touched the glass.

And then, he felt it.

'Cold. So deep cold. Darkness. No pain… numbness. Can think… but can’t move. Years… how many years? Mom… remember Mom. Warm tea. Winter sun. When… when will I get out? Am… am I dead?'

Alok screamed and stumbled back. “He… He… he’s alive! He’s thinking! He’s remembering his mother! I don’t know how, but I could hear his thoughts!” None of them understood how Alok had heard the boy’s thoughts — but deep inside, they all knew Anomaly X had already begun affecting them.

“Name,” Riya whispered. There was a plate below the pod. "Subject 3: Rahul Mehta. Age 19. Date: 15 September 2009. Status: Stable. Mutation: Bone

growth, skin chitinization."

“They froze them alive,” Kabir said, a dangerous calm in his voice. “For years. For experiments.”

Rudra looked around the room. There were more than fifty pods. More than fifty lives, trapped in this hell.

Then, Mayank pointed to a corner. “Look there.”

There were two pods that were different from the others—newer, more modern. One was empty. In the other…

Everyone’s breath caught.

Brijesh.

He was there. His eyes were closed, his face peaceful, as if in deep sleep. But his skin had those same purple marks, and his fingers seemed slightly longer, slightly bent.

“No…” Kabir whispered. He went near the pod and placed his hand on the glass. “Brother… I found you.”

Rudra looked at the plate below the pod. "Subject B-1: Brijesh Verma. Age 20. Date: 28 October 2023. Status: Active preservation. Comment: Mutation halted. Pure carrier. High concentration of Anomaly X."

“He’s alive,” Mayank said slowly. “The college said his body was found and called it a suicide… but that was a lie. They never killed him — they kept him here for experiments.”

“We have to get him out,” Kabir said, tears filling his eyes.

“Wait,” Rudra said. “If we take him out now, what will happen? Will he… be normal?”

“Empty pod,” Riya said, pointing to the other pod. “Whose was this?”

Mayank looked at the plate. "Subject R-1: Rohit Singh. Age 45. Date: 15

September 2009. Status: Escaped. Comment: Partial mutation. Intelligence stable. Escape: 30 October 2023. So he hadn’t died in 2009. The records had been lying. That entry was the truth in the archive: he had escaped the facility on 30 October 2023. The college’s public records had still listed him as dead — a deliberate falsification to hide the truth. So he hadn’t died in 2009. He had survived… hidden from the world."

“Rohit escaped from here,” Rudra said. “And he’s helping us.”

Just then, the lights flickered violently, and a sharp whistle blew—louder this time. Red alarm lights began to spin.

“They know!” Mayank shouted. “We have to leave!”

But the doors began to close. Even the cryo room door. Kabir tried to stop it, but it was automatic.

“This way!” Riya saw another door, probably leading outside.

They ran. From behind came hissing sounds. Gas canisters fell from the ceiling and burst—releasing a green smoke.

“Anomaly X!” Alok shouted. “Run!”

They ran down the corridor. The smoke was spreading fast, and touching it burned the skin. Rudra tore his shirt and tied pieces over everyone’s mouths.

Ahead was a staircase leading upward. “Here!” Rudra said.

They climbed. The stairs were narrow and crumbling. The smoke was chasing them from below.

And then, an earthquake-like jolt shook them.

The walls began to crack. Stones fell. “The tunnel is collapsing!” Mayank shouted.

They reached the top. There was a door that opened outward. Kabir pushed it —it was locked.

“Together!” Rudra said.

The three of them—Rudra, Kabir, and Mayank—slammed into the door. The wood creaked but didn’t break.

The smoke from below was rising higher. Alok began to cough. Riya supported him.

“One more time!” Rudra roared.

They slammed again. This time, the door broke open. The cold outside air touched their faces.

They stumbled out. They were in the jungle, away from the city. Behind them, smoke rose from the underground bunker.

“Run!” Rudra said.

They ran into the jungle. From behind came the roar of the tunnel completely collapsing.

And then, Rudra saw that Alok had fallen behind. He was coughing, and there were traces of green smoke on his face. He had been exposed more.

“Alok!” Rudra shouted and ran towards him.

But just then, a large tree, shaken by the tremors, began to fall towards them.

Rudra had a split second to decide: run, or save Alok.

He chose not to run.

He jumped over Alok, covering him with his own body.

The tree trunk hit Rudra’s shoulder. A sharp crack sounded. A wave of pain swallowed him.

He looked at Alok, who had now fainted. The smoke was all around them.

And then, Rudra closed his eyes too.

The last thing he heard was the sound of sirens from far away. And a familiar voice, screaming: “Rudra! Alok!”

Myra’s voice.

Then everything went quiet.

Chapter 21: Trapped in the Web of Evolution

Voices. Voices coming from far away. As if someone was shouting from underwater.

"'Rudra! Alok! Give me your hands!'"

It was Myra's voice. Sharp, panicked.

Rudra opened his eyes. His head was splitting, and there was a sharp, throbbing pain in his left shoulder. He was lying on the forest floor, and through the dense canopy of trees above, the night sky was visible. He saw a figure leaning over him—Myra. Tears were on her face, and her eyes were wide with fear.

"Come on, get up! We have to get out of here!" Myra pulled him up by his hand.

Rudra looked around. Alok was lying nearby, unconscious, with green blotches on his face and hands—marks of the Anomaly X gas. A little further away, Kabir, Mayank, and Riya were standing, all coughing, their clothes torn.

"That... that gas..." Rudra said, coughing.

"I called an ambulance," Myra said, her voice trembling. "But we have to reach the main road. They might come."

"Who?" Kabir asked, wiping his eyes.

"Chancellor's men. I saw two jeeps on the way. They were coming this way."

Rudra tried to stand up with effort. There was a sharp sting in his shoulder, but he stood up. He saw that his arm was unusually swollen, but the pain wasn't as much as it should have been. He helped Myra lift Alok. Alok's body was limp, completely lifeless.

"Carry him," Kabir said, and hoisted Alok onto his shoulder.

They ran through the jungle path, Myra leading the way. Behind them, smoke

was still rising from the underground bunker, and the sound of jeep engines was coming from a distance.

"This way!" Myra pointed to a narrow path.

They reached an area with fewer trees and more rocks. Riya looked back. "They're here!"

Two jeeps stopped, and eight to ten men got out—all in black clothes, masks on their faces. In their hands were not rifles, but some strange devices, like trench guns.

"They want to capture us alive," Mayank said.

"This way!" Myra shouted.

They ran towards the mouth of a narrow cave hidden in the rocks. Inside, darkness engulfed them. Myra took out her phone and turned on the torch.

The cave was damp and cold, and there was a strange smell in the air—the same smell as in the lab, but sharper.

"Where does this lead?" Kabir asked, still carrying Alok on his shoulder.

"I don't know," Myra said. "But it's better than them."

They moved forward. The cave walls were smooth, as if someone had carved them. Here and there, blue-green moss grew on them, glowing in the phone light.

Just then, Alok let out a soft groan.

"He's coming to," Riya said.

Kabir gently sat him on the ground. Alok's eyes opened, but they had a strange, hazy glow. He looked around, as if trying to recognize something.

"Here... I've been here," Alok whispered.

"What?" Rudra said.

"In a dream... I saw this place." Alok raised a hand and touched the wall. And then, he jerked back as if shocked. "They... they brought it here."

"Brought what?" Myra asked, a strange fear in her voice.

"Anomaly X," Alok said, his eyes now wide. "This cave... this is where the meteorite fell. It's its... home."

Just then, a deep, vibrating sound came from within the cave. Like a giant heart beating.

"What was that?" Kabir said, clenching his fists.

The cave opened into a wide hall ahead. Myra raised her phone. The light revealed a sight that took everyone's breath away.

The hall was enormous, and from its ceiling hung blue-green crystals, glowing with a faint light of their own. And in the very center of the hall was a giant black stone—almost ten feet tall. Its surface was uneven, and a soft, golden light emanated from it.

"The meteorite," Riya breathed out. "This is it."

But even more terrifying were the large glass boxes—cryo-pods—placed around the stone. And in them were the same figures they had seen in the bunker—the 2009 victims. But here, they were even more distorted. Some had crystals growing on their bodies. Some had completely black eyes.

"This is the real lab," Mayank said. "The bunker was just an outpost. The real work is happening here."

"And look," Myra said, a pained recognition in her voice.

In a corner of the hall, a man was sitting at a console. He had his back to them, but his white hair and military-style chair made him recognizable.

Chancellor Devraj Thakur.

He turned slowly. A calm, dangerous smile was on his face. "Welcome," he said, his voice deep and controlled. "I knew you would eventually come here.

Your curiosity... your courage... all of this is very valuable to me."

"You killed Brijesh," Kabir thundered, stepping forward.

But the Chancellor raised a hand. An invisible wave pushed Kabir back, as if there was an invisible wall.

"Killed? No. I... advanced him," the Chancellor said. "He is now in a higher state. And all of you will reach there too."

He pressed a button on the console.

From above, vents in the ceiling began releasing a glowing green smoke—the same Anomaly X gas, but more concentrated this time.

"No!" Rudra shouted.

They began to run, but the gas was spreading rapidly. Alok, who was still weak, was the last. The gas enveloped him first. He let out a scream and fell.

"Alok!" Riya screamed and ran towards him.

But just then, stones began falling from the ceiling. Due to the gas's effect, or perhaps due to some control of the Chancellor's, the cave began to collapse.

"Get out!" Myra shouted, pushing everyone towards a narrow passage.

Rudra tried to lift Alok, but the gas had enveloped him too. His breathing became rapid, and strange colors swam before his eyes. He felt his muscles twitching oddly, as if electricity was running through them.

"Rudra, come on!" Kabir grabbed his hand and pulled him. Kabir suddenly stopped, his eyes fixed on the far end of the hall where the cryo-pods were. "Wait! Brijesh! He's still in the pod!"

"The roof is collapsing on the cryo-section!" Rudra shouted, seeing a massive slab of rock crash down exactly where the pods were. "We can't get to him! He's gone, Kabir! Move!"

Kabir let out a roar of agony, but the path was blocked by falling debris. He

had no choice.

They entered the narrow passage that led upwards. Behind them, the cloud of gas was chasing them. Riya and Myra were ahead. Mayank looked back—the Chancellor was still standing at his console, smiling, as if all this was an experiment.

The passage grew narrower. They now had to crawl. Behind them came the sound of falling stones.

And then, the passage split into two.

"Which way?" Riya asked, panting.

Myra pointed to the left passage. "Air is coming from this side. Must lead outside."

But just then, a loud explosion occurred, and a large stone fell from the right passage, blocking it. Only the left passage remained.

They went that way. The passage was going upward, and the air was getting fresher. But the gas was still behind them.

And then, Alok screamed again.

He was holding his head, and his eyes had turned completely white. "Too many... too many voices... all pain... all fear..."

"Hold him!" Rudra said, and put one of Alok's arms over his shoulder.

They reached the top. There was a door—iron, rusted. Kabir pushed it, but it didn't open.

"Together!" Rudra said.

Everyone slammed into the door together. One, two, three times. The iron creaked, and the door broke open.

The cold, fresh air outside hit their faces. They were on a hilltop, and below, the city lights spread far and wide.

"We made it," Riya breathed a sigh of relief.

But just then, the cloud of gas began to emerge from the door behind them. And with it, a roar came from inside the cave—as if a giant beast had awakened.

"Run!" Myra shouted.

They ran down the hill. Grass and bushes came in their way. Alok was now completely unconscious, and Rudra was carrying him as he ran. Strange changes were happening in his own body too—his breaths were becoming long and deep, and his heartbeat, instead of racing, was becoming steady and strong.

Behind, the gas emerging from the cave covered the surrounding trees. Wherever the gas touched, leaves withered, and purple marks appeared on the tree bark.

They reached a road where Myra had called the ambulance. The ambulance was there, and two paramedics were standing outside.

"Here! Hurry!" Myra signaled them.

The paramedics placed Alok and Rudra on stretchers. Rudra was still conscious, but he felt as if his body was no longer his own. He looked at his hand—veins were blue and bulging, and something was moving beneath his skin.

Myra came near him and held his hand. "Are you okay?"

Rudra looked into her eyes. There was concern, fear, and something else... regret? Perhaps love? But he couldn't say anything now. He just nodded.

The ambulance started moving. Behind, on the hill, the gas emerging from the cave had now formed a cloud, glowing faintly green in the moonlight.

And inside the cave, the Chancellor stood before his console, watching data on a screen. On the screen were six names—Rudra, Alok, Kabir, Mayank, Riya, Myra. And in front of each name, vital signs were changing—heart

rate, brain waves, DNA sequence.

He smiled and pressed a button. A message appeared on the screen: ""Phase 1 complete. Hosts infected. Mutation process initiated.""

The Chancellor raised his hand and looked at it. On his own skin, near the wrist, a small purple mark had appeared. He touched it and smiled.

"Fear is power," he whispered. "And death... death is just a beginning."

The ambulance was speeding towards the city. Inside, Rudra closed his eyes. A voice echoed in his ears—the same deep, heartbeat-like sound that came from the cave. And he felt as if that sound was now coming from within him.

Alok suddenly sat up, his eyes now normal, but with a new, deep glow in them. He looked at Riya, and without saying anything, Riya felt that he knew—knew what she was thinking, what she feared.

"What happened?" Riya asked.

"I..." Alok said, and then stopped. "I am not the same anymore."

The sound of the ambulance siren faded into the silence of the night. But inside those six people, a new noise had begun—the noise of cells changing, of DNA being rewritten, and of a power awakening that they did not understand.

They had survived. But had they, really?

Chapter 22: Awakening Strangers

The hospital light stung the eyes—too bright, too white. Rudra opened his eyes, and the first thing he saw was the white ceiling, then an IV stand, and droplets of fluid running into the veins in his hand. His head felt heavy, and his whole body had a strange numbness, as if someone had changed him from the inside.

He slowly sat up on the bed. His left shoulder was bandaged, but there was no pain. None at all. On the contrary, he felt a strange strength, as if his muscles had tightened on their own.

He raised his right hand and gripped the steel railing at the edge of the bed. A normal grip. But as he applied a little pressure, the metal creaked. He looked in surprise—his fingers had left dents in the steel.

"What the..." he whispered.

Just then, the door opened, and a nurse entered. She was young, perhaps twenty-five, with a professional smile on her face. "You're awake? Good. You've been unconscious for over three hours."

"Three hours?" Rudra said, his voice not sounding like his own—deeper, a bit heavier.

"Yes. Your friends are here too. They're outside." The nurse began checking his vitals. As she put on the blood pressure cuff, her brows furrowed. "Strange... your BP... it's..."

"What happened?"

"Lower than normal. Much lower. But you're conscious..." She checked his pulse. "Heart rate is low too. Around forty. That's not possible..."

Rudra placed a hand on his chest. His heart was beating slowly, but each beat felt deep and strong, like a large drum being struck.

"I'll call the doctor," the nurse said and quickly left the room.

Rudra looked at his hand again. He clenched his fist. Veins bulged, muscles tightened. No pain. He gripped the steel railing on the bed again, this time with more force. The metal bent easily, as if it were wax.

The door opened again. This time, it was Myra.

Her face held a complex mix of relief, worry, and fear. Her eyes were red, as if she had been crying. She rushed to Rudra. "Are you okay? I was so scared..."

She tried to hold Rudra's hand, but Rudra pulled his hand back. A sharp, involuntary reaction.

Myra's hand froze in the air. Her eyes held a hurt expression. "Rudra..."

"Why are you here?" Rudra said, a coldness in his voice that surprised even himself.

"I... I came with you. In the ambulance. I was the one who called it."

"So you saved us? Fulfilled your duty? Or were you collecting fresh information to report to your mother?"

The words came out like poison, and their effect was clear on Myra's face. She took a step back, as if slapped. "Rudra, don't say that. I..."

"You what? You didn't lie? You're not the Dean's daughter? You didn't pretend to love me so I would trust you?"

"I didn't pretend to love you!" Myra's voice choked, tears welling in her eyes. "Yes, I lied about who I am. Yes, my mother sent me to you guys. But what happened between you and me... that wasn't an act. It was never an act!"

Rudra tried to look into her eyes—to find the truth. But his own heart had turned to stone. The Dean's words echoed in his ears—'Maintain their trust... He loves you, that is our greatest strength.'

"You should go," Rudra said, looking away.

"But..."

"Go, Myra. Not now."

Myra wanted to say something, but words didn't come. She stood for a moment, then slowly turned and left the room. The sound of the door closing filled Rudra with emptiness.

He buried his head in his hands. His fingers dug into his own hair, and he felt as if he could easily pull it out. He applied pressure—there was pain, but not as much as there should have been.

Just then, a scream echoed from outside.

A woman's scream—terrifying, pained.

Rudra jumped off the bed. His feet touched the floor, and he felt as if he could leap into the air. His strength... this wasn't normal.

He rushed out of the room. Nurses were running down the corridor towards a room. The same room where Alok had been taken.

Rudra ran. His steps were light, as if his weight had decreased. He entered the room.

The scene was horrifying.

Alok was sitting on the bed, his eyes wide, and he was screaming loudly. The same nurse who had come to Rudra's room was standing in front of him, but now she was trembling, a terrible fear on her face.

"Don't touch him!" Alok was shouting. "Don't touch! That pain... that fear... it's too much!"

A doctor tried to calm Alok, but as soon as he touched his shoulder, Alok screamed even louder. "No! Your daughter... she died in your lap, didn't she? From cancer? You couldn't save her... and now you want to save every child... but you can't!"

The doctor stepped back, his face pale. "You... how do you know that?"

Alok held his head. "I'm seeing... seeing everything. Your pain... that nurse's fear... she gets beaten by her husband... and you..." His gaze fell on another nurse standing near the door. "Your father left you when you were little... and you've always been afraid that your son would leave you too..."

Silence fell in the room. Everyone was stunned, frightened.

Rudra stepped forward. "Alok. Alok, it's me, Rudra."

Alok looked at him. His eyes had a strange glow—pain, fear, and a deep understanding. "Rudra... you... something is changing inside you. Strength...

a lot of strength... but fear too. You're afraid you'll hurt her... her... Myra."

"Quiet, Alok," Rudra said softly, and sat down on the bed. He took Alok's hand. Upon touching, Rudra felt a jolt—a strange tingling, like a mild electric current.

But Alok calmed down. His breathing slowed. "Your hand... is warm. And... calming."

The doctor stepped forward. "What is happening? This boy... it's impossible."

"Leave us alone," Rudra said, without looking at the doctor.

"But..."

"Now."

The doctor and nurses hesitated, then slowly left the room. The door closed.

Alok looked at Rudra. "What has happened to me, Rudra? I touch people and I start seeing their memories... their pain, their fear... everything."

"That gas," Rudra said. "Anomaly X. It has changed us."

He raised his hand and showed Alok how he had bent the steel railing.

Alok's eyes widened further. "You... you've become stronger."

"And you... you can read. People's hearts."

"It's a curse," Alok whispered, tears filling his eyes. "I don't want this... to know how much pain people are in."

Rudra placed a hand on his shoulder. "This isn't your curse, Alok. It's... a gift. You can understand others' pain. You can help them."

"But what about my own pain?" Alok said, and tears began to flow. "I felt that nurse's daughter's death... as if I was there. As if I lost her myself."

The door opened, and Kabir, Mayank, and Riya entered. All three had worry on their faces, but they seemed physically fine.

"Are you guys okay?" Rudra asked.

"Yes," Kabir said. "Some scratches, some injuries. But something strange... my pain... has disappeared."

Mayank took out his phone. "My thinking speed... it's become incredibly fast. I understand things in a second that used to take minutes."

"And I..." Riya said, a strange calm in her voice. "I'm getting memories that aren't mine. My uncle's... and others' too. When I touched the hospital floor, I saw... an old man died in this room last year. His children didn't come to him."

They all looked at each other. It was true. Anomaly X had changed them. Each in a different way.

"We are not normal anymore," Alok said.

"Perhaps we never were," Kabir replied. "That's why they chose us."

The door opened again. This time, it was Dean Kavya Sharma.

She was alone, and her face held deep fatigue and worry. Her eyes first went to Rudra, then to everyone else.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice heavy. "I'm sorry you're in this state."

"We don't need sorry, we need answers," Rudra said, standing up. "What is happening? What has happened to us?"

The Dean closed the door and stood in the middle of the room. "All of you have been exposed to Anomaly X. In high concentration. Your DNA has been altered."

"Have we become mutants?" Mayank asked.

"Mutation is a scary word," the Dean said. "Call it evolution. Uncontrolled, rapid evolution. Anomaly X is a catalyst. It amplifies whatever is inside you—your qualities, your abilities... and your fears too."

"So my strength..." Rudra said.

"Your determination, your physical capability—all have been amplified."

"And my... ability to read emotions?" Alok asked.

"Your sensitivity. You always understood others' emotions. Now it has become a power."

"But it's a curse," Alok repeated.

"That depends on you," the Dean said. "You can make it a curse, or a gift."

"What happened to Brijesh?" Kabir asked directly. "Did the same happen to him?"

The Dean's face turned grave. "Brijesh... he was unfortunate. He entered the cave, where the source of Anomaly X is. He got pure, concentrated exposure. His body... his body couldn't handle the transformation. He became a vessel—a vessel for Anomaly X. He wasn't killed, Alok. He was... absorbed."

"Rohit Singh?" Riya asked.

"He was an incomplete transformation. He was saved, but kept under control—for study. The Chancellor wanted to see how Anomaly X works over the long term."

"You knew all this," Rudra said, accusation clear in his voice. "You knew about that cave, all that was happening. And you did nothing."

"I tried!" The Dean's voice held emotion for the first time. "I stopped, I protested. But the Chancellor has power, resources, and an army-like organization. And my sister..."

She stopped, her voice choking.

"Your sister?" Riya asked softly.

"Dr. Meera Sharma. The head of the project in 2009. She... she is in the cave. Anomaly X assimilated her, but not completely. She is alive... in a way. And

she is the only one who can stop the Chancellor."

Silence fell in the room. There were tears in the Dean's eyes, but she didn't let them fall.

"I sent Myra to you because I knew the Chancellor would target you. You have the qualities he wants—strength, sensitivity, intelligence, endurance. He wanted to use you for his experiments. I wanted Myra to protect you, to keep you alert."

"But she lied," Rudra said.

"Lying was necessary. If you knew she was my daughter, you would never have trusted her. And you needed to trust her."

"She pretended to love me," Rudra said, pain in the words.

"It wasn't pretend," the Dean said, looking directly into Rudra's eyes. "Myra told me. She said she loves you. And that's what scares me the most. Because love... love makes you weak. And in this game, being weak is an invitation to death."

She turned and walked towards the door. "Rest. You'll be discharged soon. And then... then you'll have to choose. Run, or fight."

She left.

Kabir sighed. "So this is the truth. We are experiments. Always have been."

"But now we are more than experiments," Mayank said. "Now we are a threat. To him."

"Can we fight?" Riya asked. "He has soldiers, weapons."

"We have something else now," Rudra said. He clenched his fist. "We have each other. And we have these... these abilities."

"But we have to control them," Alok said. "If I start seeing people's pain by touching them, I'll go mad."

"We'll learn," Rudra said. "With each other's help."

The door opened once more. Myra had returned, a small paper bag in her hand. Her eyes were swollen now, but she had controlled her tears.

"I brought clothes for all of you," she said, her voice flat. "Your own clothes were torn."

She handed the bag to Kabir and, without looking at Rudra, turned to leave.

"Myra," Rudra said.

She stopped but didn't turn.

"Wait."

Myra slowly turned to look. Her eyes held a question, and a deep hurt.

Rudra got up and went to her. He took her hand—gently this time. Myra tried to pull away, but Rudra didn't let go.

"Forgive me," Rudra said, the coldness gone from his voice. "I... I was angry with you. Scared. But your mother said... you didn't pretend to love me."

Tears welled in Myra's eyes again. "I didn't. Never."

"Then... then how do we move forward? After so many lies, so many secrets?"

Myra placed her other hand over Rudra's, holding his hand between hers. "With one truth. I love you, Rudra. And I'm with you, no matter what."

Rudra looked into her eyes and felt the ice melting around his heart. He pulled her into his arms, and Myra rested her head on his shoulder.

Kabir, Mayank, Riya, and Alok watched with smiles. No words were spoken. None were needed.

Alok took Riya's hand. Riya smiled in response.

Mayank looked at his phone—on the screen, he began writing code,

recording everything he knew about Anomaly X.

And Kabir looked out the window—the city lights, the normal life that might never be normal for them again.

They had changed. Broken, yet reconnected. Afraid, yet resolute. And now, on the brink of a new beginning—not just for themselves, but for the truth that had been buried, for all those who had been lost.

Rudra gently pulled Myra away and stroked her face. "Together," he said.

"Always," Myra replied.

And in that moment, in that sterile hospital room, six hearts beat as one—with fear and hope, love and pain, and a resolve stronger than diamond.

Chapter 23: The Dean's Confession

The hospital room filled with a heavy silence after the Dean left. The truth they had just heard hung in the air—a poisonous, unwanted reality that could neither be denied nor digested.

Rudra was still holding Myra, but his eyes were fixed on the window, where the first rays of morning were turning the sky golden. Myra's body trembled slightly in his arms, and Rudra knew this shivering wasn't just due to fatigue or cold.

"She will be back," Mayank said, putting his phone down. "She said we would have to choose. It won't be that easy."

"Do we even have a choice?" Kabir said, a new, harsh coldness in his voice. "We've become mutants. We have powers we can't control. And a mad Chancellor wants us for his experiments. Running away won't help."

"We won't run," Rudra said, gently separating from Myra. He looked into her eyes—red, tired, but unwavering. "We'll fight."

"How?" Alok asked, his voice a whisper. "I can't even touch people without seeing their memories. You... you bent the bed railing. We are dangerous, Rudra. To ourselves, to others."

"Then we'll learn," Riya said, taking Alok's hand. "We'll learn with each other's help."

The door opened. The Dean had returned, and this time she had a file with her—old, brown, with "2009: Project Anomaly X" written on its cover.

"Are you all ready?" the Dean asked, her voice now heavy and formal.

"For the truth?" Rudra said. "Yes."

The Dean closed the door and stood in the middle of the room. She placed the file on a table and took a deep breath, as if about to unload a very heavy burden.

"Before I tell you everything, I need a promise from you," she said, her gaze

resting on each of them one by one. "No matter what you hear, no matter what you learn, you will keep it to yourselves. Because if this truth gets out, not only will you die, but hundreds of others will die too."

"We promise," Rudra said, and the others nodded.

The Dean opened the file. The first page was a photo—a meteorite embedded in the ground, with scientists standing around it.

"Project Anomaly X," she began. "It's not an alien infection, as you might be thinking. It's a microorganism found in a meteorite, one that can give new direction to life on Earth—terraform it. It doesn't infect; it evolves."

"Evolution?" Mayank asked. "What kind?"

"Of rewriting DNA. But it's not random. It's based on trauma—fear, pain, emotional shock. It turns those things into strength. Your own fear becomes your greatest power."

Rudra looked at his fist. His fear... the fear of losing Myra. Was that the source of his strength?

"2009," the Dean continued, and her voice choked. "The head of that project was my sister — Dr. Meera Sharma. Officially she was declared dead in an accident, but the truth was darker: Anomaly X had partially assimilated her and she remained alive in a crystalline, altered state hidden within the cave. She had once believed the sample would save humanity; it had instead imprisoned her."

She took out another photo from the file—a young woman, resembling the Dean, wearing a lab coat, smiling near a microscope.

"She started experiments on a group of volunteers—students who thought they were serving science. For the first few weeks, everything was fine. The subjects showed rapid healing, mental clarity, and enhanced strength. But then... then something went wrong."

Tears welled in the Dean's eyes, but she held them back.

"Anomaly X began reading their trauma—a girl's childhood sexual abuse, a boy losing his brother in an accident, another's mother's suicide... and it began giving physical form to those traumas. They... they began to change. Marks on their skin, limbs lengthening, their eyes... their eyes turned black."

Silence fell in the room. Alok looked at his hands—would his eyes become like that one day?

"Meera wanted to stop the project, but it was too late. Chancellor Devraj Thakur, who was in charge of funding the project at that time, ordered it to continue. He believed this 'instability' was just a phase, and eventually 'pure hosts' would be found who could handle the transformation."

"And when everything went wrong?" Riya asked.

"Then the Chancellor covered it up. All subjects were declared dead, the lab was sealed, and Meera... Meera was made to disappear. Officially, she died in an accident. But in reality..." The Dean's voice choked. "She was left near the source of Anomaly X—that meteorite. She's still there, alive... in a way. Turned into crystal, but her consciousness is alive."

Myra let out a choked sound. "Aunt... she's alive?"

"Yes, dear. But she's not the person you knew. She is now a part of Anomaly X, and Anomaly X is a part of her."

"Brijesh," Kabir said, his voice hoarse. "What happened to him?"

The Dean took out another document—a medical report with Brijesh's name on it.

"Brijesh was unfortunate. He accidentally entered the cave where the Chancellor's current experiment is going on. He got concentrated Anomaly X exposure—pure, without any dilution. His body... his body couldn't handle the transformation. He was absorbed."

"Absorbed?" Kabir stepped forward. "Meaning?"

"His body became a vessel for Anomaly X. He didn't die, Kabir. His physical

form disintegrated, but his consciousness... his memories... became a part of Anomaly X. He is now a part of that being that lives in the cave."

Kabir buried his face in his hands. His shoulders shook. Rudra thought of going to him but stopped. Sometimes pain should be borne alone.

"Rohit Singh," Mayank said. "How did he survive?"

"Rohit was an incomplete transformation. He was saved but kept under control—for study. The Chancellor wanted to see how Anomaly X affects over the long term. He was an experiment, just like all of you would have been if caught."

"And Myra?" Rudra asked, his eyes fixed on the Dean. "What was her role? Tell the truth."

The Dean looked at Myra, and a mother's love and regret flashed in her eyes.

"I sent Myra to you because I knew the Chancellor would target you. All of you have the qualities he wants—Rudra's leadership, Alok's sensitivity, Kabir's endurance, Mayank's analysis, Riya's historical memory. He considers you 'pure hosts.' And I wanted Myra to protect you, to keep you alert."

"But she lied to us," Alok said. "We didn't know she was your daughter."

"If you had known, would you have trusted her?" the Dean asked directly. "Would Rudra have gotten close to her? Would all of you have included her in your group? No. The lie was necessary. But the love... the love wasn't fake."

The Dean stepped towards Myra and took her hand. "My daughter told me she loves Rudra. And that's what scares me the most. Because in this game, love makes you weak. It can be your greatest strength, and your greatest weakness."

Rudra looked at Myra. Her eyes were telling the truth—fear, regret, love, everything.

"I didn't tell you everything, Mom," Myra suddenly said, her voice clear. "When you asked me to report their activities, I didn't. I hid many things. Because I knew if you found out, you would stop them. And they needed to know. They needed to know the truth."

She took out her phone and showed it to the Dean. "Look. Your messages. I didn't reply. I didn't tell you they were going to the cave, or that they had found the bunker. Because I... I wanted them to be free. No matter what."

The Dean looked at the phone, and a mix of surprise and pride appeared on her face. "You took a risk."

"Love requires risks," Myra said, looking at Rudra.

Rudra's heart was beating—fast, deep beats. He felt tears in his eyes. He went to Myra and took her hand in his.

"Forgive me," he said. "I should have trusted you."

"And I should have told you the truth," Myra said, tears streaming down her cheeks. "My love... my love was the only real thing among all these lies."

They embraced, and in that moment, all the tense air in the room lightened. Alok held Riya's hand. Kabir wiped his eyes and stood straight. Mayank took a deep breath.

The Dean watched with a smile, but there was pain in her smile. "Now you all know. And now you have to choose. Run, or fight."

"We'll fight," Rudra said, separating a little from Myra. "But not alone. You will help us."

"I will," the Dean said. "But the danger is immense. The Chancellor has resources, power, and a private army. And he is afraid of dying—he has cancer. He wants to use Anomaly X to achieve immortality. He wants to become a 'completely evolved human.'"

"Then we have to stop him," Kabir said, his voice now holding not anger but a cold resolve. "For Brijesh. For Rohit. For all those who died in 2009."

"But first we have to learn to control our powers," Mayank said. "Otherwise, we'll become the danger ourselves."

"I can help you," the Dean said. "I have Meera's notes, her research. We can understand how Anomaly X works, and how you can control your abilities."

"But time is short," Riya said. "The Chancellor knows we've been exposed. He'll be looking for us."

"Then we'll hide," Rudra said. "And prepare."

The Dean nodded. "Alright. I'll show you a safe place. A place where the Chancellor's eyes won't reach. But you have to leave here now. The hospital isn't safe."

"It'll take time for us to be discharged," Alok said.

"No," the Dean said, and an urgent edge entered her voice. "What you all have shown—Rudra's strength, Alok's sensitivity—the doctors are astonished. They will report it. And the Chancellor's people are in every hospital. You have to leave now."

She took a key out of her coat pocket. "Take this. The key to my house. You know the address. Go there and wait. I'll come soon."

Rudra took the key. "And you?"

"I have more work here. Your discharge papers, erasing surveillance footage... all that. Now go."

They hesitated, but there was an urgency in the Dean's eyes that couldn't be ignored.

Rudra took Myra's hand. "Let's go."

They left the room one by one, so as not to attract attention. The corridor was empty; the morning shift hadn't started yet. They went down the stairs, got out, and got into a taxi.

The taxi started moving, and Rudra looked back at the hospital. The Dean

was still there, watching them leave from the window. Her face held a strange prophecy, as if she knew this was the last time she was seeing them like this.

"Will everything be okay?" Myra asked, gripping Rudra's hand tightly.

"We'll make it okay," Rudra said. "Together."

Alok looked at Riya. "Your uncle... now you know what happened to him."

Riya nodded, closing her eyes. "Yes. And now we will end their story. The right way."

Kabir was looking out the window at the morning scenes of the city. "Brijesh... maybe he's watching us. Maybe he knows we'll fight for him."

"He knows," Mayank said. "And he is with us."

The taxi stopped in front of the Dean's house. It was in a quiet area, surrounded by trees. They unlocked the door with the key and entered.

The house was simple but clean. Shelves filled with books, some old photos —a young Dean and another woman, probably Meera, laughing.

Myra picked up a photo. "This is Aunt. Mom's twin sister. They were very close."

Rudra looked at the photo. Both looked similar, but Meera's eyes had a curious sparkle, while the Dean's eyes held seriousness.

"We should rest," Mayank said. "And then plan."

They sat in the living room. Rudra sat Myra next to him. Alok and Riya sat together. Kabir sat alone on a chair, and Mayank took out his laptop.

"We should list our powers," Mayank said. "From what we know."

"Rudra—super strength and enhanced durability," Myra said.

"Alok—empathy and emotional/memory reading," Riya added.

"Mayank—enhanced analytical ability and processing speed," Mayank said

himself.

"Kabir—pain tolerance and adrenaline control," Kabir said.

"Riya—historical memory access," Alok said.

"And Myra?" Rudra asked. "What is her ability?"

Everyone looked at Myra. She hesitated, then said, "I don't know. Maybe no ability manifested in me."

"Your name was 'Redacted' in the Chancellor's file," Mayank reminded. "That means there's something special about you that was hidden."

"Perhaps he knows you're my daughter," a voice said.

Everyone turned, startled. The Dean was standing at the door, tired but alert.

"Mom!" Myra went to her. "Is everything okay?"

"For now," the Dean said, entering and closing the door. "But we have little time. What I did might have bought us a day. After that, they'll find us."

"Then we have to hurry," Rudra said.

"Yes," the Dean said, taking out some files from a bag. "These are Meera's notes. And this... this is the device she made."

She took out a small, handheld device that looked like an old Walkman.

"What is this?" Riya asked.

"A frequency generator. Meera thought Anomaly X is affected by certain frequencies—pure joy, unconditional love. That could be its weakness."

"Love," Alok whispered. "So that's the thing that makes us powerful."

"And what can defeat the Chancellor," Rudra said. "Because he is driven not by love, but by fear."

The Dean looked at everyone. "So get ready. Tonight, we go back to the

cave. And we end this game forever."

By nightfall, they had planned, tested their abilities, and promised each other —no matter what, they would stay together.

And when night finally fell, and they were walking on that same jungle path again, their hearts held fear, but more than that, they held faith—in each other, and in the love that bound them.

The Dean looked at them all one last time. "Remember, Anomaly X is a mirror. It amplifies what is inside you. The Chancellor's fear will create a monster. But your love... your love can create something wonderful."

Rudra held Myra's hand. Alok held Riya's. Kabir and Mayank stood behind them.

And they disappeared into the darkness, towards the cave where both their destiny and their fears awaited them.

CHAPTER 24: SHATTERED TRUST, UNITED HEARTS

Dean's house was now filled with a strange peace. The truth that had shattered their world just hours ago had now become their new foundation. But this ground was still shaking, ready to slip out from under them at any moment.

Rudra stood by the window, watching the drizzle outside. Evening was falling, and the sky had turned a slate grey, as if filled with smoke. His palms were still warm—a strange, internal heat was coursing through his veins. He looked carefully. No smoke was rising, no glow was visible, but he could 'feel' it. A power that had slept deep within his bones was now awake.

"Are you okay?"

Myra's voice brought him back to the present. She stood behind him, holding two cups of tea. Her eyes were swollen, but they no longer held tears, but rather, a look of clear sight.

"Yes," Rudra said, taking the cup of tea. Their fingers touched. A jolt like electricity passed through—not painful, but intense. Myra flinched slightly, but didn't pull her hand away.

"I'm sorry," Rudra spoke.

"For what?"

"For all of it... what I said. What I thought. I doubted you... I doubted your love."

Myra placed her cup on the table and took his hand in hers. "You 'had' to doubt, Rudra. I lied. I hid things. But listen... listen and look."

She took out her phone and opened those old messages sent to Dean. Then she showed her archived chats.

"Look here. October 15th. Mom messaged: 'Where is Kabir? Send his location.' My reply: 'He's in the library.' That was a lie. He had gone to Brijesh's house that day, to see his mother."

She scrolled. "October 22nd. 'What are Alok and Riya doing?' I wrote: 'They are working on a project.' While at that moment, they were decoding the bunker maps."

One by one, she showed every message where she had deliberately given wrong information, or given no reply at all. In some places, several of Dean's messages lay unanswered.

"I was protecting you," Myra said, her voice choked. "Yes, in the beginning, Mom sent me. But when I talked to you... when I got to know all of you... I couldn't do it. I couldn't hand you over to them. You weren't just a project. You guys... you became my friends. And you..."

She looked into Rudra's eyes. "You became my love. And love... love cannot be betrayed."

Rudra looked at the phone. The proof was before him. Black letters on a white background. Myra had taken risks for them. Gone against her own mother.

All his anger, all his pain, all his confusion—melted away in an instant like ice. Tears streamed from his eyes, silently, without any sobs. He cried until his whole body shook. This was not a cry of terror, nor of exhaustion, but of a deep, cleansing relief.

Myra pulled him into her arms. "Everything will be okay. I'm here. I was always with you."

"I was scared," Rudra said, his voice muffled against Myra's shoulder. "Scared that your love... was also part of this conspiracy. That the first time I loved someone this much... it was also a lie. I couldn't have borne that truth."

"This is the truth," Myra said, running her fingers through his hair. "My love. That's all."

In the other corner of the room, Alok and Riya sat on the sofa. The truth Dean had revealed had given Riya a strange peace. Her face was sad, but not broken.

"Your uncle," Alok said softly. "He... he went peacefully. Dean said, right? Anomaly X preserved his consciousness. He is part of the cave's energy."

"I know," Riya said. "But I... I want to know his last moments. Was he scared? Did he feel pain?"

Alok hesitated. His new ability felt like a curse. Every touch plunged him into someone's memories, someone's pain. But perhaps... perhaps this time it could be a blessing.

"Would you... would you want me to see?" he asked.

Riya looked at him. "You can do that?"

"I don't know. But if there is anything of your uncle's here... anything at all..."

Riya took out an old, leather wallet from her bag. "This is his. Mom gave it to me. It has his college ID, and a small photograph."

She opened the wallet. Inside was a torn black-and-white photo—a young Rohit Singh, with a woman, probably his wife, laughing.

Alok took a deep breath. He held Riya's hand before touching the photo. "I'm doing this for you."

His fingers touched the picture.

And the world changed.

'"

"A hazy light swirled before Alok's eyes. Then came voices—first distant, then closer."

"He was in a narrow, damp cave. The air smelled of earth and some metal. Before him stood Rohit Singh, but not old, rather young, perhaps around forty. He had a journal in his hand and was writing something."

""Subject 7 was calm again today," Rohit muttered to himself, his voice holding a scientist's curiosity. "But while taking samples, his eyes... they

were no longer human. Are we doing something wrong?""

"Suddenly, footsteps echoed from the other end of the cave. Rohit hid the journal. A few men entered—in military uniforms. Leading them was a solidly-built man with white hair. Chancellor Devraj Thakur."

""Dr. Singh," the Chancellor said with a smile, but his eyes held no warmth. "Progress?""

""Very slow, sir. Anomaly X... it's more complex than estimated. It doesn't just cause physical changes, it works on emotional and mental levels as well.""

""We need speed," the Chancellor said, a dangerous edge entering his voice. "I don't have time. The cancer... it's advancing. We need pure hosts. Is the list of those students ready?""

"Rohit nodded hesitantly. "Yes, but sir... they are children. We cannot experiment on them.""

"The Chancellor took a sharp step forward, coming very close to Rohit. "They are not children, Doctor. They are the future of humanity. And I will secure that future, whatever it takes.""

"He turned to look at his men. "Bring them. Tomorrow night.""

"Fear was in Rohit's eyes. He saw the Chancellor's hands trembling—a sign of the illness. Fear... the Chancellor was going mad with the fear of dying."

"When everyone left, Rohit took out his journal again. He began writing rapidly. "The Chancellor's fear is blinding him. He is willing to cross ethical boundaries. I must do something. I must warn these children.""

"He took a small pen drive from his pocket, containing a backup of all the data. Then he circled a location on an old, hand-drawn map—the same bunker where it all began."

"Then there was another sound. Rohit quickly hid the pen drive and map in a crevice. Two men had returned."

""The Chancellor thinks you are no longer reliable, Doctor," one said."

"Rohit tried to step back, but the other man grabbed his arm. "You need some rest.""

"They started leading him towards the darker part of the cave. Rohit did not resist. His face held not fear, but a firm resolve. He looked towards the crevice where he had hidden the evidence. Then he closed his eyes."

"A final thought crossed his mind—his wife's laughter, his daughter's wedding day which he would not see... and a hope that someone would find the clues he left behind."

""Forgive me, Priya," he whispered. "I will try to come to you.""

"'

Alok jolted back to the present. His breath was rapid, and tears streamed from his eyes.

"Alok?" Riya asked worriedly, holding his hand.

"He... he wasn't scared," Alok said, looking into Riya's eyes. "Not even in the final moments. He was resolute. He hid evidence... for us. He tried to save us. And his last thought... was love for your aunt. And hope for you."

Riya took a deep, trembling breath. Then she hugged Alok, and this time, her tears came—a long-suppressed grief now being released. But along with sorrow, there was also a strange peace. She knew now. Her uncle was a hero.

"Thank you," she whispered in Alok's ear. "You gave me what I've been searching for years—peace."

Alok held her tighter. His ability was not a curse, but a gift. He had eased someone's pain. Lightened someone's heart.

At the other end of the room, Kabir and Mayank sat with Dean at the table, reading Mira Sharma's notes.

"Look here," Mayank said, pointing to a page. "'Anomaly X works on

trauma-based evolution. But it is influenced not only by negative trauma, but also by positive emotions. Just as fear can become strength, love can become a shield.'"

"That is the basis of the frequency generator," Dean said, picking up the small device. "Mira found that unconditional love, pure feelings of joy—they create a frequency incompatible with Anomaly X. Like a physical allergy."

Kabir looked at the device. "So we just have to turn this on and defeat the Chancellor?"

"It's not that easy," Dean said. "This device needs an emotional source—a real, deep love. Not theatrical, but pure. Like the moment a mother hugs her child for the first time. Like two hearts feeling true union."

She looked towards Rudra and Myra, then towards Alok and Riya. "You all have that capacity. The bond between you... that could be our weapon."

"But what is my role?" Kabir asked, his voice flat. "My ability is just to endure pain. How will I fight?"

Dean looked at him closely. "Kabir, your ability comes from your character. You have always been the person who stands up for others, no matter how much you get hurt. That is strength. And your anger... it is not fuel anymore, but a tool. You just have to learn to control it."

Kabir clenched his fists. He couldn't forget Brijesh's mother's crying face. He had promised. "I will control it. Whatever it takes."

Mayank opened his laptop. "I've started tracking the Chancellor's corporate structure. He has a private security company—'Ashwatthama Security Solutions'. Most of their employees are ex-Army commandos. They are well-trained, and have probably had mild exposure to Anomaly X."

"Meaning they will be stronger than normal soldiers," Rudra said, who had now come to the table with Myra.

"Yes, but perhaps not as strong as we can be," Myra said. "We don't have fear. We are fighting for each other."

Dean watched with a smile. This was the fire she had hoped for. "Alright. So the plan is: we go back to the cave. I think the Chancellor will summon us there. He will want to go to Mira—to the source of Anomaly X."

"And what will we do?" Riya asked.

"First, we try to contact Mira. She is connected to Anomaly X. She can tell us what the Chancellor wants to do. Second, we activate this frequency generator. But for that we need an emotional peak—a moment when our love is the purest, the most intense."

"This is risky," Mayank said. "If we become emotionally unbalanced, filled with fear or anger, this device could backfire. It could make Anomaly X more powerful."

"So we have to balance each other," Alok said. "When Rudra's anger rises, Myra calms him. When I start drowning in emotions, Riya brings me back. When Kabir's pain becomes too much, we all support him."

It was a simple plan, but they all knew how difficult it would be. On the battlefield, emotions go out of control.

"One more thing," Dean said, and her voice became serious. "I won't be able to come with you."

"Why not?" Myra immediately asked.

"Because the Chancellor will be looking for me. If I go with you, he will detect it immediately. I will stay here and create a distraction. I'll give some clues to the media, so his attention stays here."

"But that's dangerous!" Myra protested.

"Everything is dangerous, child," Dean said, stroking Myra's cheek. "But sometimes, the greatest sacrifice is made by the one who doesn't go to war."

She looked at everyone. "You all must stay here tonight. Rest. Talk. Strengthen your bonds. Tomorrow night, it will all end—one way or another."

The night deepened. Dean cooked for them—simple dal and rice, but everyone felt it was perhaps the most delicious meal of their lives. After eating, they gathered in the living room. No TV, no phones—just them and their thoughts.

Kabir suddenly began speaking. "I met Brijesh for the first time when I came to college. I used to be very angry. I would fight with everyone. One day I got into a fight with three guys. They were beating me up, and Brijesh passed by. He didn't help me."

"He didn't?" Mayank asked.

"No. He just stood and watched. When they left, he came and said, 'You could have won if your anger didn't control you.' I tried to hit him. But he caught my fist, easily. And said, 'I can teach you how to use this anger.'"

Kabir smiled, a rare, soft smile. "He taught me martial arts. Not just fighting, but breathing, meditating. He made me human. And I... I couldn't protect him."

"You did," Rudra said. "You kept his memory alive. You stood by his mother. And now you will fight in his name. That is true protection."

One by one, everyone shared their stories. Mayank told how he had distanced himself from his parents, fearing they would face trouble because of his hacking. Riya remembered the summer days spent with her uncle, when he would take her to archaeological sites. Alok talked about his loneliness, how he always felt others' emotions but couldn't express his own.

And Rudra and Myra told the story of their love—the small things, like the first time their hands touched, the first time they ran together in the rain, the first time they fought and made up.

This conversation was a kind of therapy for them. Every shared memory, every admitted fear, was strengthening the bond between them.

Around midnight, Dean told them to sleep. The house had two bedrooms. The boys took one room, the girls the other. But sleep didn't come to anyone.

Rudra's eyes were open, looking at the ceiling. He could feel his power still humming inside him, like a flowing river. He looked at his palm. Imagined controlling that power.

"Sleep, Rudra," Kabir's voice came from the darkness. "Tomorrow we will need our strength."

"You can't sleep either?" Rudra asked.

"No. But I am resting. That's enough."

In the other room, Myra and Riya were on the same bed.

"Do you think we can win?" Riya whispered.

"We have to," Myra said. "I cannot lose Rudra again. And you cannot lose Alok. We have all become a family. And family is protected."

Riya held Myra's hand. "Your mother... she is very brave."

"Yes," Myra's voice grew thick. "And I will make her proud."

Morning came. A normal morning, like any other day. But the air held a tension, a waiting.

Dean made breakfast. Everyone ate quietly. No one spoke because everything had been said.

Finally, it was time to prepare. They put on simple, dark clothes that could easily blend with the cave's dirt. Dean gave them small backpacks containing water bottles, a first-aid kit, and the frequency generator.

"Take this," Dean gave Myra a small silver chain with a crystal pendant. "This is Mira's. When you see her, it will recognize you. Whatever has happened to her, she is still my sister inside. Give this to her."

Myra wore the chain around her neck. The crystal was warm.

Dean hugged each one of them. When she came to Rudra, she put her hands on his shoulders. "Protect her. And protect yourself too."

"I will," Rudra promised.

Finally, she stood before Myra. Their eyes said a lot—apology, love, pride, fear. No words were necessary. Dean kissed her, on her forehead, and then opened the door.

Outside was the cool morning air. The sky was covered with clouds, as if it might rain.

"We're going," Rudra said.

And they walked out—six friends, six warriors, six hearts now beating as one. Looking back, they saw Dean still standing at the door, like a statue, watching them leave.

The path to the jungle felt familiar now. But this time, there was less fear, and more resolve.

Halfway there, Alok suddenly stopped and touched a tree. His eyes gleamed. "He... he was here. Brijesh. He came this way. He touched this tree, thinking it might be the last time he was touching something living."

"What did he feel?" Kabir asked, his voice rough.

"Not fear," Alok said with a smile. "Curiosity. He wanted to know what this Anomaly X was. He was an explorer, an adventurer."

Kabir nodded and walked ahead. His steps were stronger now.

The mouth of the cave was now before them—a dark, open mouth that seemed ready to swallow them. Rudra looked at everyone's faces. No one was backing away.

"Remember," he said. "We are for each other. Our love is our strength. And our bond is our shield."

Myra held his hand. Riya held Alok's. Kabir and Mayank stood behind them, their shoulders touching.

"Let's go," Rudra said.

And they disappeared into the darkness, carrying their fear, their hope, and their love. Behind them, the world was going on as usual. But their world was now this cave. And their battle had now begun.

File number 2009 was about to close. But their own file—their story—was entering its most crucial chapter yet.

Chapter 25: The Rise of Resolve

The cave's darkness had swallowed them whole. The beams of their flashlights cut through the dust particles hanging in the air, but the gloom was so profound it seemed to consume even the light. The air was damp, carrying a strange odor—of old earth, metal, and something sweetly rotten.

Rudra walked ahead, his fists clenched. With each step, he felt that power inside him, like a wild animal stirring in its cage. He glanced back—Myra was right behind him, he could hear her breathing. Alok and Riya walked hand in hand. Mayank was engrossed in the blue glow of his device's screen. And Kabir...

Kabir walked at the very back. His gait was heavy, as if each step required immense effort. But this heaviness was not physical; it was mental. His eyes looked ahead, but his gaze was elsewhere—on the threshold of Brijesh's house, where his mother had wept, "My son did not come back."

"Stop here," Mayank said suddenly, freezing in place. He raised his device. "Thermal signatures. Three... no, four bodies. A hundred meters ahead."

"Chancellor's men?" Myra whispered.

"Perhaps. But they're not moving. They're stationary."

Rudra gestured with his hand—move forward carefully. They reached a turn and halted, stunned by the sight.

This part of the cave was wider, and blue-green crystals grew on the walls, emitting a faint glow of their own. In their light, four figures were visible—human, but distorted. They stood with their heads bowed, as if asleep. Their skin was crusted, and some had... not hands, but fleshy, pointed appendages.

"The victims of 2009," Alok said, holding his breath. "Changed by Anomaly X."

"Are they... alive?" Riya asked.

Just then, one figure moved its head slightly. A low, groaning sound echoed

in the air. "Sa... save us..."

Kabir's body tensed. That voice... it sounded familiar. Without thinking, he took a step forward.

"Kabir, no!" Rudra warned, but it was too late.

The moment Kabir came within ten feet of them, all four figures raised their heads simultaneously. Their eyes opened—black, shiny, without pupils. They were alive, but no longer human.

One attacked swiftly. Its distorted arm shot towards Kabir, sharp claws gleaming. Kabir tried to dodge, but it was too fast. The claws raked across his shoulder.

"Ah!" Kabir cried out, doubling over in pain.

But then something strange happened. The pain was there—sharp, piercing—yet it was accompanied by a coolness. As if his mind had detached from the agony. He felt something coursing through his veins—hot, rapid. Adrenaline, but controlled. A calm fury.

He looked at his wound. Blood flowed, but he could feel his muscles contracting, trying to seal it. He raised his head. The creature stood before him, ready to attack again.

Then Rudra stepped forward. He picked up a large rock nearby—a rock two men together couldn't have moved—and hurled it at the creature. The rock hit it squarely, and the creature fell back.

"Fall back!" Rudra shouted.

But Kabir did not retreat. He stepped forward, towards the creature now writhing on the ground. He looked at its face—distorted, yet still somewhat human. The eyes... in those black eyes was fear.

"You... who are you?" Kabir asked.

The creature's lips moved. "Am... Amit. I am Amit."

Amit. Kabir remembered—a name from the list of missing students from 2009. Amit Verma. Mechanical engineering student.

"How did they bring you here?" Alok asked, stepping forward hesitantly.

"Experiment... promised... to make us better..." Amit's voice was breaking. "But this... this pain... forever..."

His body convulsed. The other three creatures groaned too, but they did not advance. Perhaps Anomaly X had preserved some memory, some consciousness within them.

Kabir knelt and took Amit's hand. It was cold, rough. "I'm sorry. We couldn't save you."

Amit looked into Kabir's eyes. "Save... the others... stop this..."

His eyes closed. His body fell still, though he still breathed. He was alive, but trapped in that inhuman state.

Kabir stood up. The wound on his shoulder was beginning to swell, but the pain now felt distant, muffled. He tore a strip from his shirt and bandaged the wound.

"We have to keep moving," Myra said, her voice a mix of pity and urgency. "These... these people can't help us now."

"But we can help them," Kabir said, a new determination in his voice. "By ending all of this."

They moved forward, leaving the distorted figures behind. The cave grew deeper, and the air heavier. There were more crystals now, their glow casting an eerie light.

After walking for an hour, Mayank signaled another stop. "From here, the cave splits into two. The left path goes downwards—probably to the depth of the meteorite. The right path... has signs of electrical wiring. Probably a base camp."

"Where will the Chancellor be?" Rudra asked.

"A dying man will go straight to the source," Alok said. "He'll go down."

"But his army will be above," Myra said. "We have to deal with both."

Kabir looked at the left path, descending into deep darkness. Then at the right path, where artificial light flickered. "We have to split up."

"No," Rudra said immediately. "We stay together. Dean said—our strength is in being together."

"But if we all go one way and are attacked from the other?" Kabir argued. "We'll be surrounded."

His logic was sound. Rudra looked at Myra, who was flipping through her mother's notes.

"Mom drew a map of this place," Myra said. "Both paths eventually meet at the same place—a large hall where the meteorite is. But in between... the right path has laboratories, barracks."

"So the Chancellor's army will be there," Mayank said. "If we go straight down, we must evade them. If we go right, we must confront them."

Everyone fell silent. It was an impossible choice.

Then Kabir spoke. "I'll go right."

Everyone looked at him. "Alone?" Riya asked, astonished.

"Yes. I'll keep them busy. You all go down, deal with the Chancellor."

"This is suicide, Kabir," Rudra said, concern in his voice. "You can't face an entire army alone."

Kabir showed his wound, where the bleeding had now stopped. "My ability is to endure pain. I can fight, no matter how injured I get. And..." he paused, "I promised Brijesh's mother I would end this. This is the way."

Alok looked at Kabir. In his eyes flashed a strange vision—Kabir, surrounded, fighting, but not yielding. It wasn't the future, but a possibility.

Yet it held a resolve that seemed unbreakable.

"We can't leave you alone," Myra said.

"You must," Kabir said. "Because if we all fight together, and the Chancellor uses Anomaly X, everything will be for nothing. We have to stop him. And for that, someone must make a sacrifice."

The word hung in the air. 'Sacrifice'.

Rudra went to Kabir and put his hands on his shoulders. "Without you... we are incomplete."

"And without all of you, I am incomplete," Kabir said, becoming emotional for the first time. "But sometimes, staying incomplete is necessary so the rest can remain whole."

He opened his bag and took out a photo of Brijesh—from their first day of college, both smiling. "This will stay with me. And all of you... you are with me, always."

No more arguments remained. The truth was that Kabir was right. They had no time, and someone had to stay behind to hold off the Chancellor's army.

"Alright," Rudra said, his voice thick. "But on one condition. You will not try to die. You will only hold them off, and then come back. We will wait for you."

Kabir tried to smile. "Promise."

They searched their bags. They gave Kabir some extra rations, a water bottle, and Mayank gave him a small communicator. "Its range is limited, but if anything happens, send a signal."

Kabir took it. Then, one by one, they hugged him. When Alok touched him, he saw a glimpse—Kabir, standing at the doorstep of Brijesh's house, his mother offering him tea, and in Kabir's eyes a resolve stronger than diamond.

"Your mother... she will be proud of you," Alok whispered.

Kabir nodded, his eyes moist. "Tell her... I tried."

They parted. Kabir walked into the right-hand path, the light of his torch slowly fading into the darkness. Rudra, Myra, Alok, Riya, and Mayank turned towards the deep left path. With each step, their hearts grew heavier, but they had to move forward.

'"

Kabir walked alone. The path seemed to slope upward, and soon he saw electrical wires running along the walls. Then came sounds—of men talking, of machinery humming.

He turned off his torch and moved forward in the faint glow of the crystals. The path opened into a doorway—a metal door, slightly ajar. Peeking inside, he saw.

It was a large room, resembling a makeshift laboratory. Microscopes, chemicals, and computer screens sat on tables. About ten men were there—in military uniforms, armed. They were talking, drinking coffee. One of them said, "The boss said he's going down. We're to stay here, report if anyone comes."

"But who would come here?" another said. "Those students? They must be dead by now."

Kabir steeled his heart. He slipped inside the door, silently.

The first man saw him. "Who...?"

Kabir wasted no time. He moved swiftly and landed his fist on the man's jaw. The sound was like breaking bone, and the man fell back.

The others stirred. Weapons were raised. "Intruder!"

Bullets flew. Kabir tried to hide behind a table, but one bullet hit his leg. The pain was dizzying, burning. But again, he felt that coolness. His mind cleared. The pain was now just a signal, data.

He overturned the table, using it as a shield as he advanced. One man

attacked him with a knife. Kabir took the knife's slash—it sank into his arm. Blood spurted. But Kabir did not scream. With his other arm, he struck the man's head hard, and he fell unconscious.

Three men remained. They saw Kabir fighting despite two serious wounds. Fear was in their eyes.

"This... this isn't human!" one shouted.

Kabir charged forward, slamming him into the wall. Then he picked up the second and threw him aside. The third was about to fire, but Kabir grabbed his hand and twisted it. With the sound of breaking bone, the weapon fell.

The room fell silent. All the men lay unconscious or wounded. Kabir stood breathing heavily, his body drenched in blood. Bullet and knife wounds in his leg and arm. But he kept himself upright.

He leaned on a table and examined his wounds. The flesh was torn, but the bleeding was slowing. His ability was working—controlling the pain, holding his body together.

Then he heard another sound—from a nearby room. A crying sound? He staggered towards it.

Opening the door, he saw a small room with a bed, a table, and a woman sitting there. She was young, but her eyes were fearful, exhausted. And beside her... a child, two or three years old, asleep.

"Who are you?" the woman asked fearfully.

"I... I'm fighting to end this," Kabir said, steadying himself. "How are you here?"

"My husband... he worked for the Chancellor. When he refused... he was killed. And my son and I were taken prisoner here. They say we are 'insurance.'"

Kabir's anger boiled again, but he controlled it. Another innocent life was in danger here.

"You have to get out of here," he said. "I've cleared the way. Get out and run."

"But they... they're outside too."

"I'll handle it."

The woman picked up her son, who had now woken up and started crying. "Hush, son. This uncle has come to save us."

Kabir led them out, through the main room where the wounded men still lay. The child screamed upon seeing the blood.

"Close your eyes," Kabir said, trying to soften his voice. "Everything will be alright."

They moved towards the cave entrance. On the way, they encountered two more men, but Kabir dealt with them quickly. His injuries looked terrible now, but he was not broken.

Finally, they reached the cave's main entrance. Outside, it was night, and fresh air touched Kabir's face.

"Go," he told the woman. "Go straight to the police. Tell them everything."

"But you... you're injured."

"I have more work to do."

The woman looked at him with tear-filled eyes. "Your name?"

"Kabir. And if you meet someone... meet Brijesh's mother... tell her that Kabir kept his promise."

The woman nodded and ran into the darkness with her son.

Kabir turned back. His work was not done yet. He had to go back and ensure no more of the Chancellor's men could advance. And then... then he had to reach his friends.

He staggered back inside. With each step was pain, but with each step was also resolve. He took out the photo of Brijesh and looked at it.

"It wasn't your turn, brother," he whispered. "But it is mine. And I will see it through."

The cave's darkness began to swallow him again, but this time he was not alone. With him were the memories of his friends, Brijesh's spirit, and a resolve stronger than death.

Kabir was no longer just a boy. He was a bulwark—steadfast, immovable, a bastion of morality. And he knew that as long as he breathed, he would fight.

CHAPTER 26: TOUCH AND MEMORY

The depths were swallowing them whole. Fifteen minutes had passed since they had left Kabir behind, and every second was an agony. The stairs—old, iron, rusted—spiraled downward into the darkness, vanishing from sight. The air had grown heavier, and now carried a strange hum, as if some giant machine were operating far away.

Rudra was in front, the beam of his torch trembling. He glanced back. Myra was right behind him, her breath coming in sharp gasps. Alok and Riya were walking hand in hand—Alok's face was pale, as if weighed down by an invisible burden. Mayank was at the rear, his eyes fixed on his device.

"Stop here," Alok said suddenly, and sat down on a step. He buried his face in his hands.

"What happened?" Riya immediately sat beside him.

"Voices... so many voices," Alok said, his voice trembling. "This place... it isn't just stone. It's full of memories. Every crack, every crystal... something is trapped inside it."

He touched the wall, then jerked his hand back as if burned. "2009... they were all here. Children... they were playing. Then pain... an endless pain..."

Myra opened the notes Dean had given her. "Mom wrote—Anomaly X isn't just physical, it leaves emotional and mental imprints too. Whatever happened here has been etched into these rocks."

"So Alok is feeling them," Rudra said. "His ability..."

"It's not just an ability," Alok said, eyes closed. "It's a curse. I'm feeling the pain of all of them—every child, every scientist, every person who drew their last breath here."

Riya took his hand in hers. "You're not alone. I'm here."

Alok looked into her eyes. There was a peace in Riya's touch, a coolness that soothed his burning sensitivity. He took a deep breath. "With you... it's easier

to bear this."

They moved on. The stairs finally opened into a vast cavern. Crystals were everywhere—on the walls, hanging from the ceiling, rising from the floor. Their blue-green glow made the whole hall shimmer. And in the very center of the hall... was a thing.

It was a meteorite, or its remains. A large chunk of black, porous stone, around which a web of crystals had formed. And within those crystals... a figure was visible.

"My aunt," Myra whispered.

Dr. Meera Sharma. Or her body. She was encased within the crystals, like an ancient insect in amber. Her arms were spread, her head bowed, and her eyes were closed. Yet her face held a peace—a peace that seemed not like death, but like a deep sleep.

"She's alive," Alok said, without touching. "I can feel her presence. She's... she's dreaming."

"Of what?" Mayank asked.

"Ours. Everyone's."

Then a voice echoed—directly in their minds. Soft, feminine, weary. ""You have come. I knew you would.""

They all startled, looking around. The voice wasn't coming from anywhere, yet it was in the air, inside their skulls.

"Aunt?" Myra stepped forward.

""Myra. My dear niece. You've grown up. I last saw you when you were two.""

Tears welled in Myra's eyes. "We've come to save you."

""There is nothing left to save. I am part of it now—of Anomaly X. And it is part of me. But you must save... you must stop the man who is coming.""

"The Chancellor," Rudra said.

""Yes. He fears death. And this entity feeds on fear like sustenance. His fear... it will create a monster.""

Riya opened her bag and pulled out her uncle's notes. "My uncle wrote that Anomaly X has a weakness. Do you know it?"

A moment of silence. Then Meera's voice came again, a little clearer now. ""It is not just a creature. It is a mirror. It amplifies what is within you. Fear into power. Love... love into a shield.""

"Love?" Alok asked.

""Pure joy. Unconditional love. That emotional frequency which has no selfishness, no fear. Anomaly X cannot endure that frequency. It is like poison to it.""

Riya pulled a page from the notes. "Here... my uncle wrote an equation. '$\psi = \kappa(1 - \alpha/\beta)$'... it's the equation for emotional frequency! And a note here—'α is the coefficient of fear, β of love. As β approaches infinity, ψ becomes incoherent.'"

Mayank leaned in to look. "Infinite love... the feeling of unconditional love creates an incoherent frequency for Anomaly X. That's the principle of the Frequency Generator!"

""You have the device?"" Meera's voice held a note of urgency.

Myra produced the old, Walkman-like device. "Yes. But Mom said activating it requires a genuine, profound emotional source."

""That source is within you. Within all of you. In your bonds.""

Then, noises came from far away—footsteps, orders being given. The Chancellor's men. They were coming down.

"We're running out of time," Rudra said, alert. "We need to hide, to plan."

They hid behind a cluster of crystals. Alok and Riya were together, and

Alok's hand was shaking.

"Are you okay?" Riya asked.

"No," Alok said. "I can feel them... the Chancellor's men. Some are afraid, some are cruel. And one... one has a dead heart. That's the Chancellor."

He closed his eyes, and a vision surfaced—a hospital room, Chancellor Devraj Thakur, in his younger years, talking to a doctor. "Cancer... six months. No cure." The Chancellor's face emptied of belief. Then another scene—him standing before the meteorite, madness in his eyes. "I will not die. I will become the next stage of humanity."

Alok opened his eyes. "He truly fears death. So much that he has lost his humanity."

Riya cradled his face in her hands. "You shouldn't see any more. It will consume you."

"But I have to see," Alok said. "We need to know what we're fighting."

In the distance, the Chancellor and his men entered the hall. There were about twenty of them, all armed. And among them, the Chancellor—in his sixties, white hair, but standing with a straight, military bearing. His eyes were fixed on the meteorite with a hungry, covetous gaze.

"Dr. Sharma," the Chancellor said, his voice rough, grating. "It has been a long time."

""Devraj. You did everything I tried to prevent.""

"You tried because you lacked vision," the Chancellor said, moving closer to the meteorite. "You were merely an idealistic scientist. I am a warrior. And in war, anything is justified to win."

He removed his coat. Beneath his clothes, an IV was attached to his arm—a liquid glowing with a faint blue light. Pure Anomaly X extract.

"Today, I will cast off my fear. Today, I will become a god."

The Chancellor turned the knob on the IV. The blue liquid began flowing into his veins. He groaned, a pained, yet ecstatic sound.

Rudra looked at Myra. "We need to act now."

"No," Myra said, her eyes fixed on Meera's crystal-encased form. "We have to wait. For the right moment."

The Chancellor's body began to convulse. His eyes widened, and an unnatural gleam entered them. Something shifted beneath his skin, like worms crawling.

"Sir!" A soldier stepped forward. "Are you all right?"

The Chancellor turned, and his eyes held no human emotion now. Only an animalistic violence. He reached out a hand—and the hand elongated, transforming into a muscular limb ending in sharp claws. He grabbed the soldier by the neck and threw him aside in one swift motion.

The other soldiers backed away, raising their weapons. But it was too late. The Chancellor's body was changing—growing, thickening, his skin splitting to reveal a black, glossy surface beneath. He was turning into a monster.

"Now!" Rudra yelled.

They emerged from their hiding place. Rudra attacked first—he tore a large crystal from the ground and hurled it at the monster that was the Chancellor. The crystal shattered against its chest. But the Chancellor was unharmed. He roared—a sound that was not human, but bestial.

The soldiers opened fire. Bullets ricocheted off the Chancellor's body. He was now impenetrable.

Mayank opened his laptop. "I'm jamming their communications!"

But the Chancellor's gaze was now on them. He stretched his long, muscular arms toward them.

"Scatter!" Myra shouted.

They ran in different directions. Alok and Riya hid together behind a large crystal. Alok was breathing hard, trembling.

"I can feel his fear," he whispered. "He is still afraid. Deep inside. He thinks this power will take his fear away, but it's only amplifying it."

Riya opened her uncle's notes again. "Pure love... we need to generate that frequency."

"But how?" Alok asked. "Amidst all this fear and violence?"

Riya looked at him. Her eyes held a softness, an understanding. "How are you with me, when you feel the pain of others?"

"With you... with you I feel peace," Alok said. "Your presence anchors me."

"That is love," Riya said, with a slight smile. "A place where you are not afraid. Where you don't need to hide."

She took Alok's hand in hers. "I love you, Alok. For your sensitivity, your fear, your strength. And this love... it is unconditional."

Alok looked into her eyes. There was no hesitation, no doubt. Only truth. And that truth calmed the storm inside him.

He realized his ability—which had always felt like a burden—was now a gift. Because through it, he could feel not just pain, but also love. And Riya's love... it was a pure, clear stream.

"I love you too," he said, and the words left his lips unbidden, as if they had always been waiting there. "For your courage, your determination, your gentleness."

The distance between them vanished. Alok cradled Riya's face in his hands, gazing at her lowered eyelids. Then, softly, he pressed his lips to hers.

It was not a searing kiss, nor one of fiery passion. It was a soft, calm touch—like the first raindrops falling on earth. It held a recognition, an assurance that they were not alone, had never been alone.

When they parted, Alok had tears in his eyes. But they were not tears of pain; they were of relief. A relief that he had finally accepted someone with his whole being, and had been accepted in return.

And then, something happened.

The crystals around them began to glow softly. A gentle, golden light, different from the blue-green glow. This light was emanating from the two of them—from their hearts, their souls.

In the distance, the Chancellor-monster paused and looked toward them. Its eyes held a discomfort, as if staring into a bright light.

""That's it!"" Meera's voice resonated in their minds, now filled with excitement. ""The frequency of pure love! The device... activate it now!""

Myra picked up the Frequency Generator. The device's screen was now flickering, showing a wave—steady, pure. She switched it on.

A sound resonated—very low, but so deep it vibrated in their bones. It was not music, but a pulse, a heartbeat. The heartbeat of a human heart.

The Chancellor-monster screamed. It covered its ears, but the sound was not coming from outside; it was coming from within. The Anomaly X, now part of its body, was reacting to this frequency.

"It's working!" Rudra shouted.

But the Chancellor did not surrender. Enraged, he slammed his fists on the ground, and large crystals broke loose and flew through the air. One hurtled toward Alok and Riya.

Alok pushed Riya aside, but could not save himself. The crystal struck his shoulder, and he fell to the ground. The pain was sharp, but his gaze was on Riya, who was safe.

"Alok!" Riya screamed, running to him.

"I'm okay," he said, panting. But he was bleeding.

The Chancellor-monster was now advancing toward them, writhing from the sound of the Frequency Generator, but still dangerous. Rudra attacked it with all his strength, but was pushed back.

Then, a brilliant light burst from Meera's crystal-encased body. ""Enough!""

A wave of energy spread through the hall. The Chancellor-monster froze. Its body convulsed, as if two forces were battling—one of fear, one of love.

Riya helped Alok up, and their touch once again began generating that golden light. The light was brighter now, merging with the sound from the Frequency Generator to create a powerful wave.

The Chancellor-monster fell. Its body began to shrink, to contort. It kept screaming—"No! I am immortal! I will not die!"

But the Anomaly X was now abandoning it. The entity, which fed on fear, could not endure this frequency of pure love. It began to ooze out of the Chancellor's body as a black, viscous substance, dissipating into the air.

The Chancellor returned to his human form—weak, old, dying. His eyes were now filled with terror. "No... this cannot be..."

He collapsed to the ground and went still.

Silence fell over the hall. The Frequency Generator shut off. The golden light slowly faded.

Alok and Riya were holding each other, tears on both their faces. Rudra and Myra came to them. Mayank let out a breath and closed his laptop.

""You did it,"" Meera's voice came, now very faint. ""Love has defeated fear. That is true evolution.""

Myra went to the crystal and touched its gleaming surface. "Aunt... what happens now?"

""I will remain here. The guardian of this place. Anomaly X is calm now, but it needs balance. I will be that balance. You go... and live. Love. That is the greatest power of all.""

Her voice grew fainter, then faded into silence. The crystals returned to their normal glow.

Alok looked at Riya. "Are you okay?"

Riya nodded. "Yes. And you?"

"I'm okay now," he said, and kissed her again. This kiss was deeper than the first—a promise, a new beginning.

They looked around. The Chancellor's soldiers had either fled or lay unconscious. The battle was over.

But one battle remained. Kabir's.

"We have to get to him," Rudra said, his voice worried. "He's alone."

They ran back toward the stairs leading upward. Alok's shoulder ached, but he walked with Riya's support. Their love was no longer just a feeling, but a living, breathing thing—a power that had defeated a monster.

And as they ascended, Alok felt that his ability no longer controlled him. He could control it. Because now he had an anchor—a love that kept him grounded.

They knew it wasn't all over yet. But they knew they could face any challenge now.

Because fear can give you strength, but love... love makes you invincible.

Chapter 27: The Final Gambit

The stairs had become an endless torment for them. Every step was taking them further from Kabir, even while knowing he was likely waiting for them. Alok's shoulder was burning, but more than the pain, he was tormented by worry for Kabir. Riya remained his support, her gentle grip acting as an anchor for Alok.

"He'll be okay," Rudra said, as if trying to convince himself. "Kabir is strong."

"But he was alone," Myra said, her voice laced with fear. "He chose to sacrifice himself."

Mayank checked his communicator. "No signal. Either his device is damaged, or..."

He didn't finish the sentence. They all knew what the second option was.

Suddenly, Alok stopped short. He braced himself against the wall with one hand and clutched his forehead with the other. "Aah!"

"What happened?" Riya asked anxiously.

"A thought... a violent thought. Someone is angry... very, very angry." Alok's breathing quickened. "The Chancellor... he isn't dead. He is alive, and now he's even more dangerous."

"But we defeated him," Myra said. "The frequency generator—"

"Wounded him, didn't kill him," Mayank said. "And a wounded animal is the most dangerous."

They reached the top, the place where Kabir had left them. The room was now empty, but the signs of battle were clear—overturned tables, broken equipment, and bloodstains on the floor.

"Kabir!" Rudra shouted. No reply.

They searched the entire room. Kabir was nowhere to be found. But the

bloodstains led towards a door, which was now open.

"He went out," Riya said.

"Or was taken out," Alok corrected.

Just then, Myra's phone rang. An unknown number. She looked at Rudra in surprise.

"Answer it," Rudra said.

Myra picked up the phone. "Hello?"

A familiar, grating voice came through—Chancellor Devraj Thakur's, but now it had a new, metallic tone, as if a machine was speaking. ""You all performed well. But the game isn't over yet.""

"You... you're alive?" Myra asked.

""Dying was not my plan. Just like your mother's.""

Myra's heart stopped. "My mother? What do you mean?"

A video call appeared on the screen. Myra put it on speaker. The video showed Dean—her hands tied, sitting on a chair. Her face bore marks of injury, but her eyes held not fear, but anger.

"Mom!" Myra screamed.

""If you want her to stay alive, come to the meteorite cave. Not alone. All of you must come. In one hour. Otherwise...""

In the video, a man stepped up behind Dean and held a gun to her head.

"No!" Rudra yelled.

""One hour. And no police, no tricks. I am watching everywhere.""

The call disconnected. Myra's phone slipped from her hand and fell to the floor. She began to tremble, and Rudra held her steady.

"Calm down," he said, but his own voice was shaking.

"He took my mom... he captured her," Myra said through tears. "Because of me. I left her alone."

"Not because of you," Riya said, moving closer. "Because of the Chancellor. He lost, and now he wants to humble us."

Mayank opened his laptop. "I'll try to track the location."

"He's calling us to the cave," Alok said. "He'll have the advantage there. He knows the source of Anomaly X is there. Perhaps he wants to try something else."

"He doesn't want to die," Rudra said. "The Dean said—he has cancer. He wants to be immortal. And we ruined his plan. Now he wants revenge on us, and maybe... maybe make one final attempt."

Myra wiped her tears. Her face now held a cold resolve. "We have to go."

"It's a trap," Mayank said. "He'll take us there and kill us. And the Dean too."

"But if we don't go, he'll kill the Dean," Riya said. "We have no choice."

Alok held Riya's hand. "We go together. And we fight together."

"What about Kabir?" Rudra asked. "We can't leave him."

Just then, a sound came from the doorway. A groaning sound. Everyone turned to look.

Kabir was standing at the door, swaying. His body was soaked in blood—a deep wound on his shoulder, a bullet graze on his leg, knife cuts on his arm. But he was standing. His eyes were glazed but open.

"Kabir!" Rudra ran to him and supported him.

"I'm... I'm okay," Kabir said, panting. "They... they tried to stop me. But I... I stopped them."

He looked around. "The Chancellor?"

"Alive," Myra said. "And he's taken my mother."

Anger returned to Kabir's eyes. He steadied himself and stood straight. "Then we have to go."

"But your condition..." Riya said worriedly.

"I'm fine," Kabir said, and his voice held a new, solid resolve. "The pain... the pain is under my control now."

He looked at his wounds. The bleeding had stopped, and the cuts were swollen but closing. Anomaly X had given him strength—to endure pain, to recover from injuries.

Rudra looked at him closely. "Are you really okay?"

"No," Kabir said honestly. "But I can fight. And I will fight. For Brijesh. For the Dean. For all of us."

They had only fifteen minutes left to decide. Mayank quickly gathered his equipment. Myra checked the frequency generator—it was still working, but its battery was low. Riya flipped through her uncle's notes again, hoping to find another weakness.

Alok went to Kabir and held his hand. "What did you see there?"

Kabir closed his eyes. "Many men... they weren't scared. They were trained. And the Chancellor... he's even more dangerous now. He has taken something else. Something that has... changed him."

"He must have taken a larger dose of Anomaly X," Mayank said. "Perhaps directly from the source."

"So the frequency generator won't work this time?" Myra asked.

"It will," Riya said. "But we need a more powerful emotional source. It worked the first time because Alok's and my love was pure. But now... now we are all scared, angry."

Rudra looked at Myra. "Our love is pure too."

"Yes," Myra said. "But is it powerful enough to defeat the Chancellor's fear?"

"It has to be," Rudra said. "Otherwise, we all die."

They gathered their things. Kabir picked up a small knife from the floor and hid it in his arm sling. Rudra noticed Kabir's hands were trembling—not from pain, but from adrenaline.

"You have to stay in the middle," Rudra said. "We'll protect you."

"I don't need protection," Kabir said. "I just need a chance to fight."

They exited the cave. Outside, the night had deepened, and clouds covered the sky as if a storm was coming. The air carried a strange electric smell.

"How does he know we'll come?" Riya asked.

"Because he knows we have no choice," Alok said. "And because he knows us. He has our files. He knows we'd do anything for each other."

The path through the forest seemed even more frightening now. The fear of an enemy hiding behind every tree. Their pulses quickened with every rustle.

Halfway there, Mayank signaled them to stop. "Wait. My device is showing some activity. Ahead... about a hundred meters. Heat signatures. A lot of them."

"How many?" Rudra asked.

"At least thirty. Maybe more."

Kabir clenched his fists. "He's brought an entire army."

"We are six," Myra said. "And we have powers."

"But they have bullets," Mayank said in a realistic tone. "And numbers."

Rudra looked at everyone. "We need a plan. Not a direct assault. We have to be clever."

"I can jam their communications," Mayank said. "But for that, I need to get very close to them."

"I'll take you," Rudra said. "I'll be your shield."

"And me?" Kabir asked.

"You find the Dean. Your ability will protect you from injuries. You get her out safely."

"And us?" Riya asked.

"You and Alok keep the frequency generator ready. Activate it the moment you get a chance. And Myra..."

Myra looked at Rudra. "I'll stay with you. I'll be your eyes. There's something else in Mom's notes... about the cave, about secret passages."

Rudra hesitated. He didn't want to put Myra in danger. But her eyes held a determination that could not be denied.

"Okay," he said. "But you stay behind me. Always."

They finalized their plan. Mayank and Rudra would go from the left, jamming communications. Kabir from the right, finding the Dean. Alok, Riya, and Myra would go through the main entrance, to draw attention.

"Remember," Rudra said. "Our goal isn't to defeat the Chancellor, it's to save the Dean. Get her out safely, then run."

"But the Chancellor..." Myra said.

"We'll deal with the Chancellor later. First, we need to survive."

They split up. Alok held Riya's hand, and Myra started walking behind them. Kabir disappeared to the right behind a bush. Rudra and Mayank vanished into the deep darkness to the left.

'"

Alok, Riya, and Myra moved towards the cave's main entrance. Ten men stood guard in front of the door, all armed. One of them stepped forward.

"Stop! Drop your weapons!"

"We don't have weapons," Myra said.

"Then hands up!"

They obeyed. The man searched them and confiscated the frequency generator.

"What is this?"

"A music player," Riya said instantly. "For stress relief."

The man looked at it suspiciously but put the device in his pocket. "Go inside. The boss is waiting."

They were pushed inside. The cave's main hall seemed even more terrifying now. Large lights were mounted on the walls, illuminating the entire hall. And in the center... stood the Chancellor.

He had changed. His skin now looked pale, almost translucent, with black veins visible, as if a toxic fluid was running through his body. His eyes were red, and a black liquid dripped from the corner of his lips. He had taken a larger dose of Anomaly X, and his body was now breaking down.

"Welcome," the Chancellor said, his voice now dual—his own, and a grating, deep one. "My guests."

"Where is my mother?" Myra asked directly.

The Chancellor gestured with his hand. In a corner, the Dean was tied to a chair. Her eyes were open, and she was looking at Myra. Her face bore injury marks, but her eyes held a message—'run'.

"Let her go," Alok said. "You want us."

"Yes, I want you," the Chancellor said, taking a step forward. His walk was

strange, as if he was fighting his own body. "You people... you are my greatest achievement. Pure hosts. Your bodies can handle Anomaly X. And I... I can't handle it anymore."

He looked at his hand, which was now trembling. "My body is breaking down. Cancer has hollowed me out, and now this lifeform... it's eating me from inside. But I've found a way."

"What way?" Riya asked.

"A new body," the Chancellor said, and his red eyes fixed on Rudra. "Or rather... more than one body. All of your bodies. I will divide myself among you all. You will all become my vessels. And this way, I will become immortal."

The idea was so horrifying that Alok's breath caught. He could feel the Chancellor's fear had now turned into madness. He was so afraid of dying that he wanted to possess others' bodies.

"That's not possible," Myra said.

"It is," the Chancellor said. "Anomaly X can transfer not just the body, but consciousness. Meera Sharma proved it. She is alive in those crystals now. And I... I will live on in all of you."

He pressed a button. Metal walls began descending from all four corners of the hall, blocking all exits. They were trapped.

"Now," the Chancellor said. "Let's begin."

He signaled his men. They stepped forward, holding syringes filled with a black liquid—pure Anomaly X.

Myra looked towards Rudra, who hadn't arrived yet. Kabir wasn't visible either. Their plan was failing.

But then, the lights blinked and went out. The entire hall plunged into darkness, save for the faint glow of the crystals.

Mayank had done his job.

Chaos erupted in the darkness. The Chancellor's men looked around confused.

"Now!" Myra shouted.

Alok grabbed Riya's hand, and they ran to one side. Myra dropped to the ground and pulled a small knife from her boot, which she had hidden.

From a distance, a voice echoed—Kabir's. "Dean! Here!"

Kabir had entered through a secret door in the wall, mentioned in the Dean's notes. He reached the Dean and started cutting her ropes.

"Kabir, no!" the Dean said. "You're injured."

"Come on!" Kabir said, trying to lift her.

But then the lights came back on. The Chancellor had started the backup generator. And now he was standing right in front of Kabir and the Dean.

"Brave," the Chancellor said. "But foolish."

He attacked Kabir. His hand, now muscular and pointed, shot towards Kabir. Kabir defended, but he was too fast. The Chancellor's hand pierced Kabir's chest.

"No!" the Dean screamed.

Kabir cried out, but he didn't give up. He pulled out his hidden knife and stabbed it into the Chancellor's arm. Black liquid spurted out, and the Chancellor screamed, stumbling back.

Myra ran to them. She snatched the frequency generator from the pocket of the Chancellor's man, who still had it.

"Alok! Riya!" she shouted.

Alok and Riya joined hands. Their love awakened again, and a golden light began to spread. Myra switched on the frequency generator.

But this time, it had no effect on the Chancellor. He laughed—a horrible, distorted laugh. "This won't work! I have abandoned my fear! I do not fear anymore!"

And indeed, there was no fear in his eyes now. Only madness. He had suppressed his fear so deeply that it no longer affected him.

"So what will you do now?" the Chancellor said, advancing. "Your love is weak against my madness."

He stood before Myra. "Your mother's eyes are like yours. Perhaps I'll start with her body."

"Don't touch her!" Rudra's voice echoed.

He came running and slammed into the Chancellor with full force. The Chancellor fell away but got up immediately.

"Rudra!" Myra screamed.

"Your mother is safe," Rudra said. "Mayank got her out. Now only this monster remains."

The Chancellor stood up. His body was distorting further. "So now you are all before me. Excellent. I'll take you all together."

He roared, and black, fleshy tendrils began emerging from his body, spreading in every direction. He was transforming into a monster—a monster born not from fear, but from madness.

Rudra held Myra's hand. Alok held Riya's. Kabir, drenched in blood, came and stood beside them.

"We fight together," Kabir said.

"Yes," Rudra said. "Together."

And the Chancellor-monster fell upon them, its tendrils ready to attack from all sides. The final battle had begun.

CHAPTER 28: THE MIRROR'S SECRET

The Chancellor-monster’s every attack was an apocalypse. Its black, fleshy tendrils slammed against walls, shattered massive crystals, and tore through the air toward the team. Rudra tried to grab and rip one tendril, but it was slippery and strong, like living rubber.

"This isn't working!" Rudra shouted, drenched in sweat and blood.

Kabir, blood still seeping from his chest, tried to block a tendril's strike with his body. The tendril pierced his shoulder, and Kabir's face twisted in pain, but he didn't scream. His eyes held a hollow, calm violence—that controlled form of adrenaline that was his new ability.

"He's countering our every move," Mayank said, shielding his laptop. "My jamming signals aren't working either. There's something else in his body now... not external energy, but internal."

Alok pushed Riya aside as a tendril shot toward them. He looked at the tendril—not just with his eyes, but with his sensitivity. And he felt... emptiness. A void that swallowed emotions.

"There's... there's nothing in it," Alok gasped. "No fear, no anger, no pain. Just... a hunger. A craving."

"A craving for immortality," a new voice resonated.

This voice wasn't in their minds like before, but in the air. Soft, feminine, yet laced with pain. They all turned.

The eyes of Dr. Meera Sharma, trapped within the crystals, were open. They were glowing—a gentle, white glow, distinct from the blue light of the crystals. Her lips weren't moving, but the voice came, as if the crystals themselves were speaking.

"Aunt?" Myra stepped forward, tears returning to her eyes.

"Myra. My dear. You've grown so much." Meera's voice held a maternal warmth, a love that transcended time and form.

"We came to save you," Myra said, moving closer to the crystal.

"There is no need to save me. I am saved. In this form. But you... you are in danger."

The Chancellor-monster attacked again. This time its tendrils moved straight for Meera, as if irritated by her presence. But the tendrils began to burn as they neared the crystals, turning into black smoke.

"You cannot win, Devraj," Meera said, her voice firm now. "What you discovered, you never truly understood."

"I understand!" the Chancellor-monster's voice boomed, now completely inhuman. "It is power! Immortality!"

"No," Meera said. "It is a mirror."

A strange calm fell. The Chancellor-monster halted, as if the word had touched it.

"A mirror?" Alok asked.

A soft light emanated from Meera's eyes, and a scene began to form in the air —like a hologram. They all saw: a young Meera Sharma, in a lab coat, sitting before a sample of the meteorite.

"2009," Meera's voice explained. "When I first began studying Anomaly X. I thought it would advance humanity. Cure diseases. But I was mistaken."

The scene changed: a child, about eight years old, playing with a toy. Then scientists lead him into a room. The child is frightened. A sample of Anomaly X is administered. And then... the child's body begins to change. His eyes turn black, his fingers lengthen. But the most terrifying part—the child begins to laugh. A laugh that is not childish, but horrifying.

"His name was Arjun," Meera said, her voice heavy with sorrow. "He was afraid of dogs. A dog had bitten him in childhood. And Anomaly X read that fear... and transformed it into power."

In the scene, the child's hands turned into sharp claws. "He was no longer

afraid of dogs. He had become one."

"My God," Riya whispered.

"It happened with every subject," Meera continued. "Anomaly X would read their inner trauma and give it a physical form. A girl who feared water grew gills on her skin. A boy afraid of the dark, his eyes began to glow like a cat's."

The scene vanished. Tear-like drops of white light fell from Meera's eyes, absorbed by the crystals.

"I tried to stop the experiments. But Devraj... he wasn't willing to listen. He said it was a 'phase of instability.' That we needed 'pure hosts'—people whose trauma wasn't too deep, or who could control their fear."

The Chancellor-monster roared. "I did the right thing! Your weakness blinded you!"

"No," Meera said, and her voice now held a divine strength. "Your fear is blinding you. You fear death. And this entity is reading that fear. Whatever you are becoming is a reflection of your fear."

Alok realized Meera's words were true. When he had sensed the Chancellor-monster, he had felt emptiness. But now, after Meera's words, he felt something else—a deep, black fear. The fear of death. This fear was so powerful it had swallowed all the Chancellor's other emotions.

"So how do we fight?" Rudra asked. "If he's just a reflection of fear, how do we fight fear?"

"Not with fear," Meera said. "With love. With joy. With pure, selfless emotions. Anomaly X cannot endure those emotions. Because it is a mirror—and a mirror only reflects what is placed before it. If you are fearful, it will amplify fear. If you are loving... it will amplify love."

"But we tried," Myra said, holding up the Frequency Generator. "We activated it. Alok and Riya's love powered it. But it didn't work this time."

"Because your love was no longer pure," Meera said. "You were afraid. Angry. And fear corrupts love."

Kabir, who had been silent until now, stepped forward. His breathing was labored, but his voice was clear. "So what should we do? We are human. We will be afraid."

"Yes," Meera said. "But you are not alone. You have each other. And sometimes, love for another... is more powerful than fear for oneself."

She looked at Myra. "Your mother... what would she do for you?"

"She would die for me," Myra said without hesitation.

"And you for her?"

Myra looked at Rudra, then Kabir, Alok, Riya, Mayank. "I would die for all of them. Not just for Mom."

"That is pure love," Meera said. "Selfless. Unconditional. And that is what can defeat Anomaly X."

The Chancellor-monster attacked again, but this time its assault carried a desperation. It had sensed its secret being exposed. Its tendrils came from all directions.

Rudra pulled Myra behind him. Kabir stood in front of Alok and Riya, acting as a shield. Mayank set his laptop aside and picked up a shard of broken crystal—as a weapon.

"We stay together," Rudra said. "And we show him what love is."

"But how?" Riya asked. "The Frequency Generator isn't working."

"We don't need it," Alok said, and his voice held a new confidence. "We just need each other."

He took Riya's hand, then Kabir's. Kabir took Rudra's hand. Rudra took Myra's. Myra took Mayank's. And Mayank took Alok's.

They stood in a circle, hands joined. And as their touch connected, something happened.

The light from the crystals began to intensify. Golden rays emerged amidst the blue glow. A hum rose in the air—the same sound from the Frequency Generator, but now it was coming from their bodies.

"What is this?" Mayank asked in amazement.

"Your bond," Meera said, pride in her voice. "You are becoming one. Not just physically, but emotionally. Anomaly X saw you as separate. But now... now you are one."

The Chancellor-monster screamed. Where the golden light touched it, its tendrils began to burn. It tried to retreat, but the light pursued it.

"No!" the Chancellor's voice became human again, filled with terror. "I don't want to die! I won't die!"

"You are already dead, Devraj," Meera said, and her voice held pity. "The day you made fear your god, your humanity died."

The golden light now formed a sphere, swirling around the team. Alok felt he wasn't just sensing his own emotions, but others' too. He felt Rudra's concern for Myra. Kabir's determination. Riya's hope. Mayank's intellect. Myra's love.

And together, they were creating a powerful, positive energy.

The Chancellor-monster's body was now breaking apart. Anomaly X oozed out of his body as a black substance, dissipating into the air. The Chancellor returned to his human form—an old, weak, dying man. His eyes were now filled with fear, but this time it was his own fear, not amplified by Anomaly X.

"Don't kill me," he begged. "I... I want to live."

Rudra stepped forward. "We won't kill you."

"But you must stop," Meera said. "Let him go. His fear is his punishment."

The Chancellor collapsed to the ground. His body trembled. "What... what do I do?"

"Go," Myra said, and her voice held her mother's firmness. "And never come back."

The Chancellor's men, who had been watching from a distance, came forward and picked him up. They left without a word, defeated.

Silence fell over the hall. The golden light slowly began to fade. The team members let go of each other's hands, but the bond between them had grown stronger.

Myra went to Meera. "Aunt... what happens now?"

Tear-like drops of white light fell from Meera's eyes again. "I will stay here. The guardian of this place. Anomaly X is calm now, but it needs balance. I will be that balance."

"But we can't leave you here alone," Myra said, tears returning to her eyes.

"I am not alone," Meera said. "I am with all those who were lost here. Arjun. Priya. Rohit. Brijesh. They are all part of Anomaly X now, and I am their voice."

Alok felt that Meera was speaking the truth. The cavern was now filled with emotions, but they were not fearful. They were calm. Accepted.

"You must go," Meera said. "Tell the world what happened here. Tell the truth. And... keep loving each other. That is the greatest power."

Her eyes began to close. "Myra... tell your mother... I forgive her. And I love her. I always will."

"Aunt..." Myra's voice broke.

"Go now."

The crystals' glow dimmed. Meera returned to that same calm, crystal-encased state. But now there was a smile on her face—a peaceful, content

smile.

The team looked at each other. The battle was over. The Chancellor was defeated. Meera was at peace. But they realized this wasn't the end. It was only a new beginning.

Kabir staggered. Rudra caught him. "You need to get to a hospital."

"Yes," Kabir said, his voice weak. "But first... first I want to meet Brijesh's mother. I want to tell her it's all over."

"We'll all go together," Riya said.

They exited the cave. Outside, dawn was breaking. The first rays were painting the sky pink. The air was fresh, as if the world had been washed clean.

In the distance, they saw Deen and Myra. Deen was safe, a little injured, but alive. She ran toward Myra, and they embraced.

"Mom," Myra began to cry. "Aunt... she..."

"I know," Deen said, her voice choked. "I felt it. She is at peace now."

She looked at Myra. "And you? All of you?"

"We're okay," Rudra said. "We're together."

Deen looked at everyone—Rudra, Myra, Alok, Riya, Kabir, Mayank. Her eyes held pride. "You did it. You not only defeated the Chancellor, but you also defeated that thing inside all of us—fear."

"We defeated it together," Alok said, and he took Riya's hand.

"What happens now?" Mayank asked.

"Now we tell the truth," Deen said. "To everyone. But first we need treatment. Rest. And then... then we'll see."

The sound of ambulances began to approach from afar. Police and media

were also arriving. Their story was about to become known to all.

But at that moment, they just stood with each other—six friends, now a family. They looked back at the cave. The faint glow of the crystals was still visible, a gentle, peaceful light.

"She was right," Alok said. "Anomaly X was a mirror. And we showed it our best reflection."

"Yes," Rudra said, and he took Myra's hand. "We showed that love is more powerful than fear."

And as the first rays of the sun fell upon the cave's mouth, the crystals shone with a golden light—a farewell, a blessing.

File Number 2009 was now closing. But their own story—their friendship, their love, their courage—that was just beginning.

And that story, they knew, would never end.

Chapter 29: The Heart's Battle

The morning light had turned the cave's entrance golden, but inside, darkness still reigned. The peace that had surrounded them a while ago was now broken. The rumble of distant vehicle engines and the crackling shouts of police radios mingled in the air.

"They're here," Mayank said, watching the signals coming in on his laptop. "Police, ambulances, media... and some other vehicles that don't look government."

"The Chancellor's men," Rudra said, his fists clenched. "He won't give up."

The Dean, who had been clinging to Myra until now, stepped away. Her face held a resolve, as if she had made a decision. "Listen, everyone. We don't have much time. The police will find us here, and then the questions will begin. But the Chancellor... he is still dangerous."

"But he lost," Riya said. "His body is broken."

"A body can break, but not an obsession," the Dean said, and her voice held a strange prescience. "I knew my sister. She used to say that fear is the most dangerous contagious disease. And the fear inside the Chancellor... it is still alive."

Alok closed his eyes. He pushed out his sensitivity and felt it—far away, outside the cave, a deep, black fear. A fear that hadn't died even after defeat, but had begun to burn brighter.

"He is coming back," Alok said, his voice trembling. "He has people with him... many of them. And they are angry."

Kabir, whose body was still soaked in blood, stood up straight. "Then we should prepare."

"No," the Dean said. "You all must leave this place. I will hold them off."

"Mom!" Myra screamed. "You can't fight alone!"

"I don't have to fight," the Dean said, and her eyes held a calm surrender. "I

just have to buy time. Time for you all to escape."

But then, gunfire sounded from the cave entrance. Shouts. Then an explosion —deafening, ear-splitting.

"They're attacking!" Mayank yelled.

The cave's entrance filled with smoke and dust. Voices were getting closer— the thud of heavy boots, the clatter of weapons. And then, a familiar voice, now completely drowned in madness.

"Come out! I know you're inside!"

The Chancellor.

He was alive, but his form was even more distorted now. He sat in a wheelchair, pushed by two of his men. His body had completely dried out, like a mummy. But his eyes... his eyes were now entirely black, without pupils, and held a strange glow.

"Look," he said in a grating voice. "I've returned. And this time... this time I am prepared."

He raised his hand, and the men standing behind him stepped forward—at least thirty, all armed. But these were not ordinary soldiers. Their eyes held the same emptiness as the Chancellor's. A light exposure to Anomaly X. They felt no fear. They felt nothing.

"They've injected themselves," Mayank whispered. "They are emotionless."

"No," Alok said, his eyes widening. "They are full of fear. It's just... that fear has turned into anger now."

"You took everything from me," the Chancellor shouted. "My health. My strength. My future. But today... today I will take it all back."

He gestured, and his men began the attack.

"Scatter!" Rudra yelled.

The team ran in different directions. Rudra and Myra hid behind a large crystal. Alok and Riya went the other way. Kabir and Mayank hid in a crevice. And the Dean... the Dean remained standing.

"Devraj," she said, her voice clear and steady. "End this. You know this is wrong."

"Wrong?" the Chancellor laughed, a horrible, coughing laugh. "The one who wins is right. And today, I will win."

He gestured to his men, and they moved towards the Dean.

"No!" Myra screamed, and jumped out, but Rudra held her back.

"Wait," he whispered. "We need a plan."

But there was no time to plan for the Dean. Two men grabbed her. The Dean didn't resist. Her gaze was fixed on Myra, and her eyes held a message—'run'.

"Now," the Chancellor said. "All of you come out, or I will kill her."

Rudra looked at Myra. Her eyes were filled with tears, but she shook her head. "We won't come out."

"Then let her die," the Chancellor said, and he aimed a pistol.

That's when Kabir attacked.

He emerged from the crevice like a wild animal. His body was wounded, but his speed was incredible. He attacked the two men holding the Dean—one with his elbow, the other with his head. They fell back, and the Dean was free.

"Kabir, no!" the Dean shouted.

But Kabir didn't stop. He moved straight towards the Chancellor, like a missile. The Chancellor's men fired bullets. One bullet hit Kabir's leg. Another hit his shoulder. A third grazed his chest. But Kabir didn't stop. His eyes held a calm, controlled violence. Adrenaline was coursing through his veins, pushing the pain away.

He reached the Chancellor and pushed over his wheelchair. The Chancellor fell to the ground.

"You... you animal!" the Chancellor screamed.

"Yes," Kabir said, and his voice held a strange peace. "An animal that protects his friends."

But the Chancellor was not one to give up. He raised his hand, and a black liquid—pure Anomaly X—gushed from his palm. The liquid spread through the air, and the men it touched began to distort.

"He's turned himself into a bomb!" Mayank yelled.

"We have to stop him!" Rudra said, and he stepped out.

There was no point in hiding now. Rudra picked up a large rock from the ground—a rock as heavy as a small car—and threw it at the Chancellor's men. The rock crushed three men and shattered against the wall.

Myra opened her mother's notes. "The cave's structure... there's a weak point here. If we bring it down, it will cover everything."

"No!" Alok shouted. "We'll all be trapped!"

"We know the way out," Myra said. "The secret passage Kabir used."

On the other side, Riya picked up the frequency generator, but its screen was blank. "Battery's dead. We need to charge it."

"How?" Alok asked.

"With emotional energy," Riya said. "My uncle wrote about it. But for that, we need to be together, of one mind."

Just then, the Chancellor attacked again. The black liquid emerging from his body was now dissolving in the air, and anyone who breathed it began to change. One soldier's arm elongated, another's eyes ruptured. They were becoming not human, but beasts.

"We have to stop this!" the Dean shouted, and she stepped forward. "Devraj! Take me! Take my body! But let these children go!"

The Chancellor looked at her. "Your body? You are old. Broken. No... I need fresh bodies. Theirs."

His gaze fell on Rudra. "His. Strong. Healthy."

Rudra held Myra's hand. "Stay behind me."

"No," Myra said. "We'll fight together."

She took out a small device from her pocket—Meera's crystal that she had found. The crystal was glowing faintly.

"Aunt... we need your help," she whispered.

And as soon as she said it, a white light burst from the inner part of the cave. Meera's crystal-body began to glow again.

""Come together,"" her voice echoed. ""Join hands. Unite your hearts.""

Rudra held Myra's hand. Alok held Riya's. Kabir, who was now wounded from fighting, came to them. Mayank too. And the Dean.

They stood in a circle, holding hands. And then, slowly, something began to happen.

Alok felt that he wasn't just feeling his own emotions, but everyone else's too. Rudra's worry for Myra, turning into love. Myra's fear for her mother, turning into courage. Kabir's pain, turning into resolve. Riya's sadness, turning into hope. Mayank's anxiety, turning into intelligence. And the Dean's regret, turning into peace.

All of this was merging into one energy—a pure, radiant energy.

The Chancellor saw it, and fear returned to his black eyes. "No... not this again!"

""Now!"" Meera's voice echoed.

And the team acted together.

Rudra used his strength. He punched the wall hard, and stones began to fall, blocking the cave's entrance.

Alok used his sensitivity. He read the minds of the Chancellor's men and told them where the attack was coming. They dodged the bullets and counterattacked.

Kabir used his ability to endure pain. He ran straight into the hail of bullets and disabled the enemies one by one.

Mayank used his intelligence. He hacked into the weapons of the Chancellor's men, and they stopped working.

Riya used her uncle's frequency generator. She opened it and charged its battery with the team's emotional energy. The device glowed again.

And Myra... Myra used her strategy. She read her mother's notes and marked the cave's weak points. "There!" she shouted, pointing to a spot. "Bring down that ceiling!"

Rudra looked. A large rock was hanging from the ceiling, connected to the crystals. He picked up another rock and threw it at that part of the ceiling. The rock hit directly, and the ceiling began to crumble.

"Run!" the Dean shouted.

Everyone ran. Kabir grabbed the Dean's hand and pulled her along. Rudra picked up Myra. Alok and Riya ran hand in hand. Mayank was last.

The cave's entrance was now closed, but they ran towards the secret passage Meera had mentioned. It was a narrow crevice that led downwards.

Behind them, the Chancellor screamed. "Don't go! I'll stop you!"

He sent his last men forward, but it was too late. The ceiling had fallen, and the rocks had sealed the cave's main hall. The Chancellor and his men were trapped.

Emerging from the secret passage, the team reached the jungle. They were safe. But they knew this wasn't the end.

From far inside the cave, a final scream was heard—the Chancellor's. And then... silence.

"He's gone," Alok whispered.

"No," the Dean said, and her voice held a strange finality. "He is gone for good."

Myra looked at her mother. "Are you okay?"

The Dean tried to smile. "Yes, dear. Everything will be fine now."

But then, her body gave way. The Dean staggered, and Rudra caught her. Blood was visible beneath her shirt.

"Mom!" Myra screamed.

"Don't worry," the Dean said, her voice growing weak. "It's just... just a small injury."

But it wasn't a small injury. She had been shot. Maybe when Kabir saved her. Maybe when she stood before the Chancellor.

Rudra laid her on the ground. "Ambulance! We need an ambulance!"

Mayank took out his phone, but there was no signal.

"No," the Dean said, and she held Myra's hand. "There's no time."

"No, Mom, no!" Myra began to cry.

"Listen, Myra," the Dean said, losing strength with every word. "I... I am going to my sister. She must be waiting for me."

"No, you can't go," Myra said, drowning in tears.

The Dean looked at Rudra. "Take care of her. Always."

"I will," Rudra said, his voice choked.

Then the Dean looked at everyone—Alok, Riya, Kabir, Mayank. "You all... you are all my children. And I... I am proud of you."

Her breathing began to slow. "Stop him... love each other..."

And then, her final breath. The Dean's eyes closed. Her face held a peace, as if she was finally at rest.

Myra screamed—a painful, breaking scream. She fell on her mother's body and began to cry. Rudra hugged her, but he was crying too.

Alok held Riya's hand, and tears streamed from both their eyes. Kabir bowed his head, and Mayank closed his eyes.

The morning light showed them mercy. Birds were chirping, as if nothing had happened. But their world was now shattered.

The battle was won. But the cost... the cost was too high.

CHAPTER 30: THE SACRIFICE

The process of Deen's body turning cold was so slow it felt like torture. Myra was bent over her, her hands touching her mother's face as if it were something warm that was cooling. From her eyes flowed not tears, but an emptiness—a sorrow beyond weeping.

Rudra placed his hand on her shoulder, but Myra shook it off. "Let go."

"Myra..."

"I said let go!" Her voice was a scream, like an animal trying to hide after being wounded.

She stood up and moved away from Deen's body as if it were now a stranger. Her eyes were wide, holding a shock beyond words.

"She's gone," Myra said, as if convincing herself. "My mother... she's gone."

Alok tightened his grip on Riya's hand. He could feel it—the waves of Myra's pain resonating in the air. A pain so sharp it cut through even his own sensitivity.

"We should leave here," Mayank said, his voice trembling. "The police will come. We have to tell them..."

"Tell them what?" Kabir said, his voice hollow. "That Deen died because of us? That we killed the Chancellor?"

"We didn't kill him," Riya said. "The cave collapsed. It was an accident."

"An accident," Myra repeated, a bitter smile on her lips. "Yes. Just an accident. Like my mother's death."

Then the ground shook.

A faint tremor, as if an explosion had happened far away. Then another. And a third. Sounds came from inside the cave—of stones shifting, rocks breaking.

"What..." Alok began, but his sentence remained unfinished.

The mouth of the cave, which had been sealed by rocks, suddenly cracked open. A black, fleshy hand emerged, tearing through the stones. Then a second hand. And then a head—or what had once been a head.

The Chancellor.

But he was no longer the Chancellor. Anomaly X had completely consumed him. His body was now three times larger, his skin black, glossy, and eyeless. Fleshy tendrils sprouted from his body, waving in the air like the tentacles of a sea creature. Where his mouth should have been was a large hole, dripping black liquid.

"No..." Mayank whispered. "This isn't possible..."

"It is," Alok said, fear in his voice. "His fear... his fear is now completely controlling him. Whatever he has become is a reflection of his fear."

The Chancellor-monster roared—a sound that was neither human nor animal, but from another world entirely. It extended its tendrils, aiming straight for Deen's body.

"No!" Myra screamed, and she moved forward, placing herself between the creature and her mother's body. "You can't touch her!"

"Myra, get back!" Rudra shouted, running toward her.

But it was too late. One of the Chancellor-monster's tendrils shot toward Myra, fast as lightning. Rudra pushed her aside, but the tendril pierced Deen's body.

And then something impossible happened.

Deen's body moved. Her eyes opened—black, gleaming. She sat up, but it wasn't Deen. A strange smile was on her face, and when she spoke, it was the Chancellor's voice.

"Thank you," she said, and the sound of the Chancellor's voice coming from Deen's mouth was so horrifying that everyone froze. "This body... there is still life in it. A little. But it's enough."

"Mom..." Myra whispered, her face white with terror.

"Not your mother, child," Deen-monster said, standing up. The black tendril was still attached to her, connecting her to the Chancellor-monster. "She is just... a vessel. Like all of you will be."

Rudra pulled Myra behind him. "You won't go near her."

"And who will stop me? You?" Deen-monster laughed, raising her hand. Her fingers lengthened and sharpened. "You all took everything from me. My project. My future. But now... now I will take all of your futures."

She attacked.

Rudra pushed Myra aside and stepped forward to block the attack. But Deen-monster was no longer ordinary. Her strength was unbelievable. She threw Rudra aside with a single blow.

"Rudra!" Myra screamed.

Alok and Riya stepped forward. Alok tried to look into Deen-monster's eyes, to read her mind. But there was nothing there. Only a void. A void that swallowed everything.

"There's nothing there," he gasped. "No memories. No emotions. Just... hunger."

"Then we'll let it starve," Kabir said, stepping forward. His wounds were still open, but he was ready to fight.

Deen-monster looked at Kabir. "You... you were already dying. Let me help you."

She attacked, but Kabir defended. He grabbed her hands, trying to restrain her. But his strength was failing. Wounds, fatigue, pain—all were weakening him.

"Mayank!" Rudra shouted, getting up. "That device! The Frequency Generator!"

Mayank opened his bag. The Frequency Generator was still there, but its screen was blank. "It has no power!"

"We have to give it power," Riya said. "With our emotions."

"But how?" Alok asked. "We're all afraid. Angry."

"No," Myra said suddenly. Her voice was calm now, eerily calm. "I'm not afraid."

Everyone looked at her. Myra stood, her eyes dry. Her face held a determination deeper than grief.

"My mother gave her life to save me," she said. "And now... now she's become part of the very thing she always feared. I can't leave her like this."

She looked at Rudra. "You have to stop me."

"From doing what?" Rudra asked, fear in his voice.

"What needs to be done," Myra said, and she walked toward the Deen-monster.

"Myra, no!" Rudra screamed, trying to grab her hand, but Myra pushed him away.

"Let me go, Rudra," she said, her eyes filled with a love that said everything. "You have to live. All of you."

And then she ran—straight toward the Deen-monster.

The Deen-monster attacked. Its sharp hands moved toward Myra. But Myra didn't defend. She spread her arms as if to embrace it.

"Mom," she said, her voice so tender it echoed in the air. "I'm here."

For a moment, the Deen-monster hesitated. Something stirred in its black eyes—recognition? A memory? Perhaps Deen's consciousness, still alive somewhere deep within.

"Ish... Myra?" Deen's own voice, weak, distant.

"Yes, Mom," Myra said, tears returning to her eyes, but this time they were tears of love, not sorrow. "I'm here. And I'm letting you go."

She stepped forward and hugged her mother.

The scene was so paradoxical that everyone froze. Myra was hugging her mother, while Deen's body had turned into a monster, the black tendril still connecting her to the Chancellor-monster.

"You... what are you doing?" Deen's voice came again, weaker.

"I'm saying goodbye, Mom," Myra whispered into her ear. "Go. Be with Aunt. She's waiting for you."

And then, she did what no one had imagined.

She raised her hand and grabbed the black tendril attached to Deen. The tendril was burning, scorching her palm the moment she touched it, but Myra didn't scream. She pulled the tendril—hard. And it snapped.

The Chancellor-monster screamed. Deen-monster's body convulsed. And then, slowly, Deen's body began to return to normal. Her black skin faded to its natural color. Her eyes returned to normal. And Deen was herself again—a dead, but peaceful woman.

But the black tendril was still in Myra's hand, and it was burning, scorching her skin.

"Myra!" Rudra screamed, running to her.

But then the Chancellor-monster attacked. It sent all its tendrils toward Myra at once. Rudra tried to block them, shielding her, but the tendrils tore through his body and reached Myra.

One tendril pierced her chest.

Myra's mouth fell open in silent surprise. She looked down at the black tendril that was now part of her body. Then she looked at Rudra.

"Rudra..."

"No!" Rudra screamed, grabbing the tendril and trying to pull it out, but it broke. A part of it remained inside Myra.

Myra fell to the ground. Rudra collapsed beside her, lifting her into his arms.

"No, no, no... Myra, look at me. Look at me!"

Myra's eyes were open, but they were foggy. "Rudra... I'm... I'm okay."

"You're not okay," he said, tears streaming down his cheeks. "You have to live. We'll save you."

But Myra shook her head. "No... this was... this was my role."

"What do you mean?"

"The Chancellor's file... my name was redacted. Because... because I was the key. My mother's daughter. Meera's niece. My blood... my blood had the resistance that could stop Anomaly X."

She continued, gasping. "But for that... for that I had to take it inside me. And then..."

"And then what?" Rudra asked, his voice breaking.

"And then I had to die," Myra said, trying to smile. "So that it would die with me."

"No!" Rudra screamed, holding her tighter. "I won't let you die. Understand? I won't let you die."

But Myra's body was growing cold. The black tendril fragment was spreading inside her, but it couldn't consume her. Instead, Myra's blood was neutralizing it. The black substance was slowly turning brown, then white, and then... vanishing.

But in this process, Myra's life was also fading.

"Rudra," she whispered. "I love you. I always will."

"Don't say that," he said, burying his head in her chest. "You'll live. We'll all be together. You promised."

"Sorry..." Myra's voice grew very faint. "My love... my love was real... among all these lies..."

Her eyes closed.

"Myra? Myra!" Rudra shook her, but there was no response. "Wake up! Please, wake up!"

Myra didn't wake up. Her breathing was shallow, barely there. Her pulse was a fading flutter, hanging by a thread.

Rudra raised his head and let out a scream—a scream filled with pain, anger, and despair. A scream that echoed through the forest, startling birds into

flight.

In the distance, the Chancellor-monster was also screaming. The part of Anomaly X that had entered Myra's body had been destroyed, and its effect was now reaching the Chancellor-monster. Its body began to shrink. Anomaly X was separating from it as a black substance, dissipating into the air.

But Rudra didn't care anymore. He sat holding Myra's body in his arms, shaking her, trying to wake her up.

Alok, Riya, Kabir, and Mayank stood at a distance, crying. No one could say anything. No words could express this pain.

Kabir stepped forward and placed a hand on Rudra's shoulder. "Rudra..."

"Let go!" Rudra shouted, shaking off Kabir's hand. "Leave her alone! She's sleeping. Just sleeping."

"Rudra," Riya said through tears. "She's gone."

"No!" Rudra said, holding Myra tighter. "She can't be gone. We promised. We would always be together."

And then, as if a switch had flipped, Rudra's pain turned to rage. He gently laid Myra on the ground and stood up. His eyes were red, filled with madness.

"He took her," he said, his voice dangerously calm. "The Chancellor took her."

"Rudra, no," Alok said, stepping forward. "Don't do this."

"And what should I do?" Rudra screamed. "Sit and cry? Wait for her to come back? No. I'll bring her back."

"You can't," Kabir said, pain in his voice. "Death cannot be undone."

"Then I'll die too," Rudra said, turning toward the Chancellor-monster, which had now shrunk into a small, distorted figure. "But first, I'll finish this."

He ran. Alok and Kabir tried to stop him, but Rudra's strength was now uncontrollable. He pushed them aside and charged at the Chancellor-monster.

He grabbed it with his hands and began slamming it against the ground. Once. Twice. Thrice. The sound of bones breaking echoed, but Rudra didn't stop.

"You took her!" he screamed with every slam. "You took my Myra!"

The Chancellor-monster couldn't even scream anymore. Its body was broken. And then, with one final slam, it burst open. Anomaly X spread everywhere as a black substance, then dissipated into the air.

The Chancellor was dead. Truly, this time.

Rudra stood there, panting. His hands were drenched in blood—the Chancellor's blood, or perhaps his own. Then he went back to Myra and collapsed beside her.

"Now," he whispered into her ear. "Now you can come back. The fight is over."

But Myra didn't get up.

Rudra hugged her and began to cry. Like a child. Like a broken man.

Alok, Riya, Kabir, and Mayank came to him. They surrounded him, and they all cried together—for Deen, for Myra, for Brijesh, for Rohit, for all who were lost.

The sun had now fully risen, its light turning the forest golden. But there was no warmth in that light. Only coldness.

The battle had been won. But the cost of victory was so high it felt like a defeat.

And Rudra knew that now, without Myra, his victory meant nothing.

Chapter 31: Shared Life

Rudra's scream echoed through the jungle and slowly faded into silence, but the pain in his heart did not lessen. He sat holding Myra's body tightly in his arms, as if letting go would make her vanish into thin air. His eyes were swollen and red, but no more tears came. A cold, numbing pain had spread within him.

Alok, Riya, Kabir, and Mayank stood at a distance, unsure of what to do. The bodies of both the Dean and Myra lay before them. The air carried the smell of death, and the distant sound of police sirens reminded them that the real world still existed.

"We... we need to do something," Mayank said, his voice utterly exhausted. "The police are coming. We have to tell them..."

"Tell them what?" Kabir said, pressing his wounds, which were beginning to open again. "That two people died because of us? That some of us have supernatural powers?"

"We have to tell the truth," Riya said, but her voice lacked conviction.

Alok looked at Rudra. He could feel his pain—a deep, black sea ready to swallow everything. And beneath that sea, another emotion—anger. An explosive, uncontrolled anger.

"Rudra," Alok said softly, and he sat down beside him. "We have to take Myra away from here."

Rudra gave no response. His gaze was fixed on Myra's face.

"Rudra, listen to me," Alok touched his shoulder.

And then the ground shook again.

This was more intense than before. A deep, rumbling vibration that seemed to shift the very earth beneath their feet. Above, rocks began to fall from the cave ceiling.

"The cave is collapsing!" Mayank yelled.

"Run!" Kabir shouted, and he moved forward to push Riya aside.

Alok grabbed Rudra's hand. "Get up! We have to get out of here!"

But Rudra didn't move. He tried to lift Myra, but his body wasn't responding. Grief and exhaustion had paralyzed him.

A large rock fell from the ceiling, heading straight for Alok. Alok saw it, but couldn't move—he wasn't willing to leave Rudra.

That's when Kabir stepped forward.

He shoved Alok hard, and Alok tumbled to the ground. The rock fell directly on Kabir.

The sound was like bones breaking. Kabir fell to the ground, and the rock landed on him, crushing his leg and waist.

"Kabir!" Riya screamed.

Rudra lifted his head. Whatever emotion was in his eyes suddenly turned to rage. He gently laid Myra down and stood up.

"You... you killed her," he said, as if speaking to the rock. "First Myra. Now Kabir."

"Rudra, no!" Alok shouted, but Rudra wasn't listening.

Rudra stepped towards the rock. It was a massive boulder, at least as heavy as a small car. But there was no fear in Rudra's eyes. Only a maddened resolve.

He slid his hands under the rock and began to push. His muscles strained, veins bulged. His face turned red, and the blood vessels in his eyes began to burst.

"Lift!" he yelled. "Lift, I'm telling you!"

The rock moved. Slowly, inch by inch, it began to rise. Rudra's legs trembled, but he didn't stop. He pushed with another surge of strength, and the rock

lifted enough to reveal Kabir's trapped body.

"Pull him out!" Rudra gasped.

Mayank and Alok rushed forward. They grabbed Kabir's body and pulled him free. Kabir was unconscious, his body a bloody mess. His leg and ribs seemed broken.

As soon as Kabir was out, Rudra let go of the rock. It fell back to the ground, and the earth shook once more.

Rudra staggered. He placed a hand on his chest. A sharp, stabbing pain shot through his chest, as if a knife had been plunged in.

"Ah!" he groaned and dropped to his knees.

"Rudra!" Riya said, moving closer.

Rudra's face had turned pale. His breathing became rapid and shallow. He opened his shirt, and a strange swelling was visible on his chest—right over his heart.

"My... my heart..." he gasped.

"Heart attack," Mayank said. "He used his power beyond its limit."

Rudra collapsed to the ground. His eyes began to close. Riya cradled his head in her lap.

"No, Rudra, no!" she began to cry. "We lost Myra. We can't lose you too."

Alok stood between them—on one side Kabir, unconscious and wounded; on the other Rudra, whose heart was failing. And in the distance, Myra's body.

He felt it—Kabir's life energy was slowly fading, like a lamp going out. And Rudra's energy was draining rapidly, like a burst dam.

Then he had a vision.

He was in a field—lush, full of sunlight. Before him stood Brijesh, as he used

to be—smiling, healthy. And behind him... Myra? No, the Dean. And Rohit Singh. And all those children who died in 2009. They were all standing there, peaceful, smiling.

Brijesh reached out a hand. "Kabir. Come, brother. You've fought enough. Now rest."

Kabir's soul, a faint outline, began to move towards Brijesh.

"No," Alok whispered, not aloud, but in his mind. "Not yet."

He saw that Rudra's life energy was now just a faint, flickering line. And Kabir's energy was also breaking apart.

And then he realized—his own ability. He could not only read emotions, but feel them. And if he could feel them, then perhaps... perhaps he could share them too.

He looked at Riya. "Take me to them."

"What?" Riya asked, through her tears.

"My ability... maybe I can do something."

Riya nodded. She took Alok's hand and led him between Rudra and Kabir.

Alok knelt. He placed one hand on Rudra's chest, the other on Kabir's, and extended his senses toward Myra’s motionless body nearby. He had to connect them all.

He closed his eyes. And then, he tried to control his sensitivity—not just to feel, but to connect. He was trying to build a bridge of energy between Kabir and Rudra.

At first, nothing happened. Just the pain of two dying bodies. But Alok didn't give up. In his mind, he searched for memories of both—Rudra's first meeting with Myra, Kabir and Brijesh's friendship, all of them laughing, fighting, living together.

And then, he felt it—a heartbeat. A faint heartbeat from Kabir's heart. And

one from Rudra's too, very slow.

He began to listen to those two heartbeats. And then, he tried to bring them together. Into one rhythm. One single beat.

It seemed impossible. But Alok poured all his strength into it. He felt his own energy diminishing, as if it was transferring into the two of them.

"Alok!" Riya said anxiously, because Alok's face was also growing pale.

"Don't worry," Alok whispered. "It's working."

And indeed, Kabir's heartbeat began to grow a little stronger. And Rudra's did too. Rudra's breaths became deeper.

But Alok's condition was worsening. Darkness began to creep into his vision. He started to fall, but Riya caught him.

"Stop, Alok!" Riya said. "You'll kill yourself!"

"No..." Alok said. "This is... this is the true purpose of my ability. To connect others. To save their lives."

He made one final attempt. He poured all his energy, all his emotions, all his love—for Riya, for his friends—into that bridge.

And then a miracle happened. Rudra gasped for air. Kabir groaned. And a few feet away, Myra’s chest rose with a sudden, deep breath. He groaned, but it was the groan of someone alive. The bleeding from his broken limbs stopped.

Alok smiled. And then, he fell unconscious into Riya's arms.

"Alok!" Riya cried.

Mayank came closer and checked Alok's pulse. "He's alive. Just unconscious."

Rudra sat up. He touched his chest. There was pain, but now it was bearable. He looked at Myra, then at Kabir, then at the unconscious Alok.

"He... he saved us," Rudra said, his voice choking again. "I was dying. Kabir was dying. And he..."

"He shared his energy with us," Kabir said, gasping. He looked at his broken leg, which was now straightening—slowly, but surely. Anomaly X was still working inside them, healing them.

Riya cradled Alok's head in her lap. His face was sweaty, but his breathing was regular. "He'll be okay," she said, trying to convince herself.

In the distance, the sirens were getting closer. Police, ambulances, fire brigade—all had arrived.

"We have to go now," Mayank said. "We have to tell them everything."

Rudra looked at Myra. Then he looked at Kabir, who was now sitting up, despite his broken leg.

"We will stay together," Rudra said, and his voice held a new resolve. "Whatever happened, we will tell the truth. And we... we will bid farewell to Myra and the Dean with honor."

Kabir nodded. "Yes. And to Brijesh too. And to Rohit Singh."

Riya stroked Alok's hair. "Alok showed us that our powers aren't just for fighting. They're for saving too."

Mayank took out his phone. "I recorded everything. The fight inside the cave, the Chancellor's transformation, everything. It's evidence."

Rudra stood up. He was still weak, but he could stand. He went to Myra and looked at her body. He stroked her face.

"I'm sorry, Myra," he whispered. "I can't live without you. But I will try. Because you wanted me to live."

He hugged her one last time. Then he took off his jacket and covered her body with it.

Police cars were now visible in the jungle. They were shouting. "Hands up!

Hands up!"

Rudra raised his hands. Kabir did too, though one of his arms was broken. Mayank did as well. Riya too, still cradling Alok's head.

A police officer stepped forward. "What happened here? We got a report of an explosion."

Rudra looked at him. "I'll tell you everything. But first... first our friends need medical attention. And these two... these two should be taken with respect."

He pointed to Myra and the Dean.

The police officer looked, and his eyes widened. "God... how many died?"

"Too many," Rudra said. "But it's over now. All over."

Paramedics from the ambulances came forward. They placed Alok on a stretcher, then Kabir. Rudra refused one and walked on his own feet to the ambulance.

As he left, he looked back. The cave entrance was now completely sealed. A pile of rocks had buried it. And beneath those rocks lay the Chancellor's body as well.

And inside the cave, among the crystals, Meera Sharma slept peacefully.

The ambulance began to move. Rudra looked out the window. The jungle was rapidly falling behind. And with it, the most terrifying, most painful chapter of their lives.

But he knew this wasn't the end. Because they were still alive. Alok, Kabir, Riya, Mayank, and he himself.

And Myra... Myra would always be with them. In their memories. In their hearts.

Rudra closed his eyes. And this time, tears came—cleansing, calming tears.

The battle was over. Now they had to find a way to live. Together.

And they would find it. Because now they were more than just friends. They were family.

And family never gives up.

Chapter 32: The Miracle

The hospital's white walls felt like a cold storage chamber to Rudra. Every surface was gleaming, lifeless, and merciless. He was lying on a bed, with dozens of wires connected to his chest, hooked up to beeping machines. Doctors were bustling around him, monitoring his heart rate, blood pressure, and other vital signs.

"Myocardial infarction," one doctor said, placing an X-ray film on a lightbox. "But this... this is impossible."

"What happened?" another asked.

"Look," the first one pointed. "The heart muscle is damaged, but it's... it's healing. On its own. Like a broken bone. I've never seen anything like this."

Rudra could hear them, but his mind was elsewhere. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling, and Myra's last words echoed in his mind. 'My love... my love was real... among all these lies...'

A tear escaped his eye and trailed down his cheek onto the pillow.

In another room, Kabir's surgery was underway. His broken ribs, fractured leg, and internal injuries were being treated. The surgeons were astounded.

"This patient shouldn't have survived three hours ago," the senior surgeon said, washing his hands. "His body has such resilience... as if his cells are healing ten times faster than normal."

"Anomaly X," a junior doctor whispered. "Is it possible?"

"Quiet," the senior said, but his eyes held the same question.

In a third room, Alok lay unconscious. Riya sat by his bed, holding his hand. Alok's face was calm but pale. His breathing was slow and steady.

"He'll be okay," Mayank said, standing at the door. His own hand was bandaged—a deep gash now closed with stitches.

"Are you sure?" Riya asked, her voice trembling.

"Yes," Mayank said, entering and sitting beside her. "Alok saved us. His ability... it's not limited to just reading emotions. He can connect them. And today, he connected life energy."

Riya tightened her grip on Alok's hand. "But he put himself in danger."

"That's his nature," Mayank said with a slight smile. "He always forgets himself for others."

Then Alok's eyes opened.

He didn't sit up immediately. He looked at the ceiling, then slowly turned his head. His gaze fell on Riya.

"Riya," he whispered.

"Alok!" Tears welled in Riya's eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," he said, trying to sit up. Riya supported him. "Rudra? Kabir?"

"They're alive," Mayank said. "You saved them."

Alok closed his eyes. "I saw... I saw Brijesh. He was taking Kabir away. But I stopped him."

"You did," Riya said, kissing his forehead. "You saved us all."

But then Alok's expression changed. His eyes widened, and he placed a hand on his chest.

"What's wrong?" Mayank asked worriedly.

"A... a pulse," Alok said, his breathing quickening. "Coming from far away. From the cave."

"The cave?" Riya asked. "But the cave is sealed."

"No," Alok said, his voice carrying a strange faraway quality. "It's still alive. Meera Sharma. And she... she is telling us something."

'"

Inside the cave, beneath the pile of stones, the crystals were still glowing. But their glow was fading, like a battery running out. Among the crystals, Meera Sharma's body was becoming transparent, as if slowly disappearing.

But her eyes were open, holding a final determination.

""I have little time left,"" her voice resonated, not just in the cave, but in the minds of all who had been exposed to Anomaly X—Rudra, Alok, Kabir, Riya, Mayank. ""But I can give you one last gift.""

In Rudra's room, the beeping of the machines intensified. His heart rate began to rise.

"What's happening?" a nurse exclaimed.

"The patient's blood pressure is normalizing!" another said. "The heart damage... it's healing!"

Rudra placed a hand on his chest. He felt a warmth, like warm water flowing through his veins. And with that warmth, a memory—Myra's laughter. The sparkle in her eyes. Her love.

""Love never dies,"" Meera's voice came. ""It only changes form.""

In the operating theater, the surgeons working on Kabir's body stopped. They saw his broken bones straightening, wounds closing, swelling reducing. This wasn't a medical miracle—it was something else.

Kabir's eyes opened. He looked up at the large surgical light, then at the surgeons. "Is... is everything okay?"

A surgeon nodded, his eyes wide. "Yes... yes, everything is fine. But how..."

""Anomaly X is a mirror,"" Meera continued. ""And today, you showed it your purest reflection—of love. Selfless. Sacrificial. And now, that love is

returning to you.""

In Alok's room, he felt his weakness fading. He got out of bed and went to the window. It was night outside, and moonlight streamed from the sky.

"She's healing us," he said. "Meera Sharma. With her final energy."

"But why?" Riya asked.

"Because we proved that Anomaly X cannot be misused," Mayank said. "We showed that love is more powerful than fear."

Then Alok felt another pulse—deeper, vibrating. From the cave.

"Something else is happening," he said. "The Chancellor..."

"'

Inside the cave, beneath the pile of stones, the Chancellor's body still lay. Anomaly X had completely consumed him, but now, due to Meera's energy, the entity was reacting.

The Chancellor's body began to tremble. The Anomaly X within him, which fed on fear, was now coming into contact with a new energy—the energy of Rudra and Myra's love. And the energy of Alok and Riya's pure bond.

""You cannot evolve from hatred,"" Meera's voice came, directly into the Chancellor's mind, which was still alive somewhere. ""Nor from fear. Nor greed. Your soul is now rejecting this body.""

The Chancellor's mouth opened, but no sound came out. Black substance began to ooze from his body, but this time, it didn't dissipate into the air. Instead, it began to glow—a golden, gentle glow.

And then, the Chancellor's body began to crumble. Bones, flesh, skin—all turning to dust. It was a terrifying sight, yet also peaceful. Like an old, broken statue turning to dust in the wind.

Within minutes, the Chancellor's body had completely turned to dust. And that dust mingled with the air, disappearing.

The part of Anomaly X that was attached to the Chancellor was now free. And it merged with the crystals in the cave, joining with Meera.

""I am at peace now,"" Meera's voice came, very weak now. ""Balance has been restored.""

Her eyes closed. The glow of the crystals settled into a steady, gentle light, making the cave resemble a temple.

'''

In the hospital, Rudra pulled the wires from his chest. A nurse tried to protest, but she stopped when she saw his wounds had vanished.

"How..." she whispered.

Rudra didn't answer. He walked toward the door. His steps were strong. His body was completely healed.

He went to Alok's room. Alok, Riya, and Mayank were there.

"Rudra!" Riya said. "You're okay?"

"Yes," he said, and his voice held a new peace. "I'm okay."

"Meera Sharma," Alok said. "She saved us. And she finished the Chancellor."

Rudra nodded. "I think... I think Myra saved us too. With her love."

Then Kabir appeared at the door. There were no bandages on his body now. He was a bit unsteady, but he could walk.

"You should be in bed," Mayank said.

"There's work more important than staying in bed," Kabir said. His eyes held a new resolve. "We need to go to Brijesh's mother. To tell her it's all over."

"And to Rohit Singh's family," Riya said.

"And we need to tell the truth," Rudra said. "To everyone."

"But will they believe us?" Mayank asked. "Our story... it's unbelievable."

"We have evidence," Alok said. "Mayank's recordings. The cave remains. And our bodies... our bodies are proof."

"And we have each other," Riya said, taking Alok's hand.

They looked at each other. Five people, who a month ago were ordinary students, had now been through an experience that had changed them forever. But their bond was now stronger than ever.

The door opened, and a police officer entered. "I'm Inspector Verma. Can I speak with all of you?"

"Yes," Rudra said. "We'll tell you everything."

"But first," the inspector said, "I need to give you this."

He took out a small packet. Rudra opened it. Inside were five crystal fragments, glowing softly.

"What is this?" Riya asked.

"We found them in the cave debris," the inspector said. "They're... strange. When we bring them together, they start to glow. We thought you might know."

Alok picked up a crystal. The moment he touched it, he felt a warmth. And an image—Meera Sharma, smiling.

"It's her memory," he whispered. "Meera Sharma's. And... Myra's too."

Rudra picked up a crystal. Touching it, he remembered Myra—their first meeting in the café, when she asked if she could sit with him.

"Yes," he said, closing his eyes. "It's her memory."

"We should keep these safe," Kabir said. "As a remembrance. In memory of all we lost."

"And in memory of all we found," Riya said.

Inspector Verma watched, and a strange understanding dawned on his face. "Seems you've all been through a lot. Come with me. We need to record your statements."

They went with him. Walking through the hospital corridor, Rudra looked out the window. The night was ending, and the first rays of dawn were appearing in the eastern sky.

"Morning is coming," he said.

"Yes," Alok said. "A new beginning."

They entered a room with a table and some chairs. The inspector placed a recorder.

"Start your story," he said. "From the beginning."

Rudra looked at Alok, then Kabir, Riya, Mayank. They all nodded.

"It all started with Brijesh's death," Rudra began. "And a cave that hid a secret..."

And he began to tell everything. The 2009 incident. Anomaly X. Dr. Meera Sharma. Chancellor Devraj Thakur. Deen. Myra. Their powers. The final battle.

The inspector listened without interruption. Sometimes he paused, asking for clarification, but mostly he just listened.

When Rudra finished, the room was silent. The inspector turned off the recorder.

"This... this is unbelievable," he said.

"We know," Mayank said. "But it's true."

"And we have proof," Alok said.

The inspector nodded. "I believe you're telling the truth. But this story... it cannot be made public."

"Why?" Riya asked.

"Because the world isn't ready for it," the inspector said. "People will be afraid. And fear... fear breeds dangerous things."

"Like the Chancellor did," Kabir said.

"Yes. So we need to reach a compromise. You all will officially be heroes—who stopped a terrorist group. The Chancellor and his men were terrorists. The cave was a secret lab. Everything else... everything else remains confidential."

Rudra thought. It was right. Telling the whole truth would only spread fear and chaos.

"Okay," he said. "But we have one condition."

"What?"

"We need to honor those who were killed. Brijesh. Rohit Singh. Deen. Myra. And the victims of 2009. We need to build a memorial."

The inspector nodded. "It will be done."

"And the cave," Alok said. "The cave must remain sealed. It must be treated as a sacred site."

"It will be done," the inspector repeated.

They left the room. In the hospital lobby, a TV was broadcasting news. "Terrorist group busted," the anchor was saying. "Students' bravery..."

"They've already crafted the story," Mayank said.

"Yes," Rudra said. "But we know the truth."

They looked at each other. And in that moment, they realized their fight

wasn't over. It had just taken a new form.

Now they had to live. With the powers they had gained. With the memories they had made. And with the losses they would never forget.

But they were not alone. They were together. And sometimes, being together is the greatest miracle of all.

Chapter 33: A New Dawn, The Same Heartbeat

The volume of the TV in the hospital lobby had been turned down, but the headline scrolling across the screen still glowed—
"“Students Thwart Terrorist Plot.”"
Rudra watched the screen for a few seconds, then looked away.
“The story has been written,” he said quietly.
Alok replied, “Yes… but the truth is within us.”
The five of them stood there for a moment. The same people—who a month ago were caught up in assignments, internals, and canteen debates—now stood carrying an invisible weight. The weight wasn’t of pain… but of responsibility.
Inspector Verma came over and said, “Rest. The honor ceremony is tomorrow. You all need to be there.”
'Honor.'
The word felt strange. Because what they had gained was far heavier than any honor.

"One Month Later"
The college auditorium was packed. Cameras, flashes, applause. Five chairs were placed on the stage. A large banner behind them read—"“Honoring the Brave Students.”"
Mayank whispered softly, “This all feels very cinematic.”
Kabir smiled, “In movies, people are saved. Here… people were left behind.”
Rudra’s gaze searched the crowd for someone.
And then he saw her.
Myra.
A pale yellow suit, hair open, the same peace on her face… but faint lines of fatigue under her eyes. As if she was still fighting the memories of her mother.
Their eyes met.

No words.
Just a small smile.
The ceremony was formal. Speeches were made. Medals were given. Photos were taken.
But as the crowd began to thin, the five gathered close to each other—as if this noise wasn't theirs, but someone else's.
Riya said softly, "Let's get out of here. Somewhere quiet."

"The Same Old Café"
The same table. The same corner. The same wall where they'd once taken a laughing group photo.
Today, there was silence.
The waiter recognized them. "It's been a long time since you all came here."
"Yes," Alok said, "A long time."
Coffee arrived. Steam rose. And with it, memories.
Kabir took a small box from his pocket. It contained those same crystal fragments.
"I carry these with me every day," he said.
Riya picked up a fragment. It began to glow faintly.
"They glow like this when we're together," she said, smiling.
"Meera Sharma," Alok whispered, "is still with us."
For a while, they just sat. No rush. No mission.
Just breaths… and peace.

"Rudra and Myra"

Leaving the café, Rudra stepped out, his hand firmly holding Myra's.

The evening air was cool, but her palm in his was warm—a constant reminder that she was here, alive, beside him.

"Are you going to therapy?" he asked softly.

Myra nodded, squeezing his fingers.

"Yes. Mom's memories… and everything that happened… I need to make room for it all inside. But it's getting better."

Rudra smiled faintly.

“I’m training too,” he said, looking down at her. “Broke a dumbbell at the gym today. Still learning to control this strength.”

Myra laughed. That same old laugh, but now it held a note of relief.

They reached the small garden behind the college—the bench where they had once sat for hours.

Rudra stopped. He stood in front of her, blocking the fading sunlight.

“Myra…” he whispered.

She looked up at him, her eyes questioning.

His hands trembled slightly as he took a small ring from his pocket. A simple band. With a tiny crystal fragment embedded in it.

He knelt.

Not in front of a memory. But in front of the woman who had fought death to come back to him.

“We’ve seen death. Seen fear. Seen lies. But one thing has always been true… your love. Will you… be the truth of my life? Forever?”

Tears rolled down Myra's face. She didn't disappear. She didn't fade into the wind.

She dropped to her knees in the grass beside him and threw her arms around his neck.

“Yes,” she whispered, her breath warm against his ear. “I already am.”

Rudra held her tight. She was solid. She was real.

And that was the only truth that mattered.

"Alok and Riya"
Riya was typing something on her laptop.
“Is that your uncle’s research?” Alok asked.

“Yes. I’m publishing it anonymously. The world should know at least some part of the truth.”
Alok took her hand. He suddenly saw a vision—Riya as a child, running through fields with her uncle, laughing.
“Let’s go there,” Alok said.
“Where?”
“To his village. You need closure.”
Riya smiled and nodded. “And you?”
“I need you,” he replied.
They did go to that village later. Sat by the river. Riya closed her eyes.
“Feels better now,” she said.
Alok felt it—his own memories of loneliness were now growing faint.

"Mayank’s Return"
The front door was open. His mother stood before him.
“Where have you been all these days?” Her voice held more concern than complaint.
Mayank couldn’t speak. He just hugged her.
For the first time in many years, he cried.
His father put a hand on his shoulder. “Everything alright?”
“It is now,” Mayank said.
That night, he sat in his room and opened his laptop… then closed it.
Today, he didn’t need any screen. He just needed home.

"Kabir’s Decision"
An empty hall. The smell of fresh paint on the walls. A punching bag in the center.
Kabir hung up a sign—
"“Brijesh’s Den”"
A few children from the slums came inside.
“Brother, will we get training here?”
Kabir smiled. “Yes. For free.”
He thought—this is what Brijesh would have wanted.
In the evening, Rudra came there. They sat in silence.
“We lost a lot,” Kabir said.
“Yes,” Rudra replied, “but we found ourselves.”

"The Memorial"

A small memorial was built near the college. Names were engraved—
Brijesh. Rohit Singh. The Dean. The victims of 2009.
The five stood before it. The air was still.
Riya placed a flower.
Alok closed his eyes.
Myra took a deep breath.
Mayank bowed his head in silence.
Kabir clenched his fist.
Rudra looked at them all.
“There is peace now,” he said.

"The Final Scene"
The same café. The same table.
Laughter echoed.
The waiter asked, “You all seem very happy today.”
Alok replied, “Yes… today, truly.”
The crystal bracelets on their wrists were glowing faintly.
All five placed their hands together on the table. The crystal light grew a little brighter.
No one said anything.
Rudra looked at them all.
Myra was beside him.
Riya held Alok’s hand.
Kabir was smiling.
Mayank was at peace.
Rudra said softly—
“The file is closed… but our story? It has only just begun.”

Dedication

For the ones who stayed.
For the ones who left.
And for the parts of me that survived both.

Acknowledgement

This book would not exist without the quiet support, honest conversations, and unseen encouragement from the people around me.

I am deeply grateful to my family and friends for their patience, belief, and understanding throughout the time it took to complete this work. Your presence mattered more than you know.

To everyone who inspired me directly or indirectly—thank you.

And to the readers, thank you for giving this story your time and attention.

— **Ashish Singh Nayal**

Author’s Note

This book began as an idea and slowly became something much more personal. While writing it, I discovered that stories often reveal truths we do not realize we are carrying.

I hope that somewhere in these pages, you found a moment that stayed with you, a thought that lingered, or a feeling that felt familiar.

Thank you for reading.

— **Ashish Singh Nayal**